

From the Street to the Stars

by PrettyFrog

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Summary: An angry young man takes his one chance to turn his life around. Now a former criminal may be the only chance the galaxy has left.

1. Chapter 1

He wiped the blood off his face, and sniffed. His nose had stopped bleeding, but his lip still oozed a little. He threw the napkin away and grabbed another one before looking at his reflection in the mirror. The lip was puffy, and already the area around his eye was beginning to swell. He touched his side gingerly, and while the rib hurt, he felt no movement. Not broken then.

Michael emptied the contents of his pockets onto the sink. Twenty-three credits, a broken comb, and a half empty tube of chapstick. Nowhere near enough for a ticket to anywhere. He replaced the items, and headed out of the refresher.

"You alright there, son?" A voice called as he started walking from the station.

He hesitated. Then he turned. An old man was giving him a concerned look. A stranger. He took a chance. "You headed east?"

The old man glanced at the vehicle beside him, and then back at Michael. "Yeah, back to New York."

"Can I get a lift? I need to get to my dad."

For a moment, he thought the old man could tell he was lying. Then he nodded. "Get in."

"Thanks." He climbed into the passenger seat and buckled up as the

old man got behind the wheel.

The small car began heading east. Leaving his father and everything else behind.

Michael didn't look back.

#

The police officer paced back and forth in the interrogation room. Michael sat in the chair, sullen and silent. The officer shook his head. "Michael Shepard. Age thirteen. You're a long way from Montana, son."

"I ain't your son."

"According to the missing person's report, your father is Douglas Shepard." The officer looked down at the datapad. "I imagine he'll be happy to know you are safe and well."

Micheal snorted. "Yeah. I'll bet he'll be thrilled." He looked up at the officer. "Who filed the report?"

The officer blinked at the question, but looked down at the datapad. "Arleen Shepard. Your grandmother." He frowned.

"She's dead, isn't she?" Michael raised an eyebrow. It wasn't unexpected. It should have hurt more than it did.

"Three months ago." The officer met his eyes. "Son, you want..."

"I ain't your son."

"Aside from your father, who is your next of kin?"

He had to think about the question. His father had a brother. "The family dog had puppies a couple years ago."

"This will go a lot more smoothly if you cooperate." The officer sighed. "The owner of the warehouse isn't pressing charges. One of our social workers is on her way to pick you up. She'll take you to a facility until we can get hold of your father."

#

When the vehicle stopped at the signal, Michael simply grabbed her purse, opened the door, and started running. He heard the social worker yelling behind him, and ducked into the first alley he came to. A quick jump got him over a fence, and he kept going. He changed direction several times before finally coming to a stop. Emptying the purse of credit chits took only a handful of seconds. He shoved them into his pocket, dumped the purse, and started running again.

#

"Michael Shepard." The officer looked down at the kid sitting across from him. "Strikes me as we've been here a couple times." He sat down and called the file up on his datapad. "Age fourteen, reported missing from Whitefall Montana almost two years ago. No

siblings."

Michael tried not to roll his eyes as the officer went over his background. He knew all this already. Just his luck to trip over a couple cops on stakeout. A few hundred credits of easily fenced goods would have kept him going for a month. At least they couldn't prove he'd actually robbed the shop. All they had him on was possession of stolen property.

"You tell us who gave you those goods, we'll be able to cut you a deal."

He smirked. "Found them."

"Found them?" The cop shook his head. "You were just walking through town, minding your own business, and tripped over them."

"That's pretty much how it happened." Michael nodded.

"You..." The cop trailed off as another officer opened the door and requested a word. He waited, staring at the empty table, until the officer had returned. "Son -"

"I ain't your son."

"I'm not sure how to break this to you." The cop sighed. "Your mother has been dead for a year. And your father died two weeks ago."

The edges of his vision blurred just slightly. He kept his face expressionless. The first bit he'd known already. Wishing it had been the other way around wouldn't help. And he wasn't sure how much it would have mattered anyway. The second... "Good riddance."

"We're trying to track down your uncle. Can you tell us anything about him?"

"Never met him." His grandmother had shown him a photograph once, lamenting how she hadn't seen her younger son since the day he'd started his stint in the Alliance military. He'd never called. Never written. Never got dragged back into the mess.

A sigh came from the officer. "I'm trying to help you here, kid." He ran a hand through his hair. "Molly..." He chuckled. "You remember Molly? You stole her purse. She's on her way here. There is a foster home you can stay at until we get hold of your uncle."

"Wonderful."

"It's a bed, clean clothes, a refresher, and three meals a day." The officer looked him over. "It's a hell of a lot more than you've got right now, kid. Maybe consider not fucking it up."

#

Molly looked up at Officer Montgomery. She saw his eyes narrow at the marks on her face. "Dammit, what happened?"

"It looks worse than it is." She sighed. "I need you to put an alert out for Michael Shepard."

Monty's face darkened. "That little bastard did this?"

"No." She caught his arm and shook her head adamantly. "He's the reason it wasn't worse." She waited for Monty to take a few deep breaths before continuing. "One of the volunteers at the halfway house was messing with the girls. I caught him smacking one of them around, telling her that nobody would believe her. I thought I could intercede and..."

"He attacked you." Monty put a hand on her shoulder.

"Last thing I saw before I passed out was Michael throwing the jackass across the room." She swallowed.

"If he saved you..." Monty frowned. "Why'd he run?"

"Because the jackass is a councilman's son." Molly rubbed her forehead. "And Michael put him in traction." She sighed. "Tina thought I was dead. With Michael's record..." She wrapped her arms around herself. "And Tina said she thought he might be hurt."

"I'll find him." Monty nodded.

"The Councilman is going to be an issue."

"Not for long." Monty shook his head. "I was already on my way when I heard what happened." He smiled. "We tracked down the uncle. He's out on Mindoir."

"Get Michael off planet as fast as you can. I'm going to do what I can to protect the girls from this fallout."

#

"With fourteen vehicles available..." Monty looked down at the report before looking back across the table. "Why the hell would you take the ice cream wagon?"

Michael shrugged. "You guys had me anyway. Figured I'd make your report interesting."

"Plead out." Monty set the datapad on the table and tried not to smile. "You'll do a month. Goes to trial, you could get two to five years."

"A month?" Michael blinked. "I thought..." He trailed off.

Monty's eyes widened. "Oh shit. You..." He ran a hand through his hair, and then smiled. "Molly's fine, kid. That asshole is doing five years. Not near enough in my book, even after the number you did on him." He glanced down at the datapad. "I need you to take the plea, kid. You drag this out at all and Councilman Valince gets wind of it, he's going to make your life miserable." He shoved the datapad across the table. "Thumbprint and voice acknowledgment. Then, soon as you get out, we'll pack you off to Mindoir."

He put his thumbprint down and signed before looking back up at Monty. "Why Mindoir?"

"We tracked down your uncle. He's been nagging me every month wondering where the hell you are." Monty saw the young man's hand shake slightly as he slid the datapad back. "He said to let him know the moment we found you, so he could get a room ready."

#

Michael watched the newsfeed with no expression on his face. Three days left, and the worst part was he'd actually started to hope. To wonder what it would be like to be a farmer out on some colony world. He looked down at the datafeed. His uncle had sent two letters. The first was three pages of apologies for not staying in touch enough to get to him sooner. He called up the second, and played one of the short videos. A red haired woman fretted about he needed to tell her if he wanted berry or custard filling for his birthday cake and how it would still be a birthday cake even if it was two weeks late, and how much she was looking forward to meeting him.

He touched the control, and pulled up the next video. A twelve-year-old girl expressed her hopes that he'd be cooler than her sister, who was apparently a gigantic doofus who never wanted to go anywhere. He flipped through to the next video, watching the faces of the family he'd almost had.

Too bad the universe just didn't fucking work that way. Seemed just learning he existed was enough to get them all killed. He closed the letter, and went back to the next datafeed. Officer Harold Montgomery, killed in the line of duty. Left behind a widow and two kids. He shut off the pad, and lay back on the cot.

#

Molly sighed. She'd tried to block the transfer, but Councilman Valince's friends had run right over her objections. Michael Shepard was going to a 'rehabilitation center'. With a sigh, she reached for her communication unit. It beeped before she could pick it up. She frowned at it, then answered the call. "Gerald, what can I do for you?"

"I just had two officers arrive to pick up that kid you were worried about." Gerald shook his head as he looked back at her. "Except apparently at some point during the night he bypassed my security system and went out the window."

"Michael is gone?" She wasn't sure if she was worried or relieved.

"Like the wind." Gerald chuckled. "Thought I'd let you know. Think he'll try to get in touch with you?"

As much as she wanted... "No. He's not stupid, and he knows its best if he doesn't."

#

Curt pounded Michael on shoulder. "Hah, did you see those bastards run?"

"I was too busy watching our backs." Michael glared at him. "Which is what you were supposed to be doing."

"Bah, it's all good." They followed the other Reds back to the hideout, and dumped the take on the table. Curt whistled. "Not bad at all."

Michael did some mental calculations. "Don't let the fence give you less than seventy."

"I was thinking..." Finch started to say.

"Don't." Michael shook his head. "You're terrible at it."

Finch threw a mock punch at him.

#

Hackett sipped at his drink, and wrinkled his nose. New York had its good points, but its coffee was not one of them. He started walking up the street for his meeting, and a young man bumped into him. He made it one more step before his hand went to where he kept his wallet.

The young man took off like a shot the moment Hackett started to turn around. Hackett sprinted after him, kicking off to tackle the other man to the ground. The younger man came up swinging. Hackett mentally noted that the kid wasn't half bad, right before he proceeded to give the guy a brief lesson in the difference between a talented amateur and a seasoned professional.

It took a bit longer than he was expecting. The guy got back up three times. He couldn't help but feel just a bit impressed. The last time he put his foot down on the kid's chest before reaching down to retrieve his wallet. He opened it to make sure the contents were all there before looking down. "It's your lucky day, kid." He put his wallet away. "I don't have time to give a statement."

He turned, and walked away. He was halfway to his meeting when he reached into his pocket for his security pass and found it missing. He ran a hand down his face, and chuckled before grabbing his comm unit.

#

The reprogrammed security pass worked like a charm. Michael grinned, then winced when it made his split lip reopen. The old geezer certainly knew how to throw a punch. That had been a lot closer than he liked. He was going to have bruises for a month.

Slicing through the security system took him only a few moments. He signaled the others, and watched them move in. Timers set, in and out in two minutes, before any red flags could be triggered.

They cut it closer than he'd like, but the last cleared out just under the wire. He carefully removed the loop from the security feeds, and reactivated the systems.

Finch was practically bouncing. "I tell you, man, soon as we cash this take out, we'll spend your eighteenth on some beach." He sketched an outline in the air. "Topless ladies as far as the eye can see."

Michael rolled his eyes. "Focus, jackass. We're not clear yet." He accepted his share, hiding it in the pockets of his clothing. "Stick to the plan. Everyone lay low for two weeks."

"Right." They split up, and went their separate ways.

#

"Well, well." Hackett narrowed his eyes. "Small world." He saw the pickpocket making his way down the street. He sent a brief message on his communicator before standing up to follow.

He saw the kid make him despite the crowd. The young man turned to run, and then there was the scraping sound of metal on metal. Both turned just in time to see the aircar bounce off the railing before slamming into the nearby building. Flames began to erupt from the engine block.

#

Someone inside the burning car was screaming. Immediately he was over the fence. The door wouldn't open. His elbow went through the window, and hit the lock. The woman in the driver's seat was dead. He grabbed the boy from the passenger seat as the flames started rising higher, and yanked him out of the vehicle. He'd got him clear and ran back for the others.

The old man was behind him. He shoved the little girl at him. "Get her clear." No sooner had the old man taken the girl than Michael dove back into the car for the other kid. The wide eyed toddler stared up at him as he unbuckled her as fast as he could. The air was hot, searing his lungs, and he could feel the flames. He yanked the kid out, burning his hand on the frame of the car as he pushed them both free.

He made it a dozen steps before the car exploded.

#

Hackett handed the girl over the fence to a bystander and started to turn back. The young thief had the other kid, and for a moment it looked like everything was going to be okay.

The explosion sent the thief flying. Hackett watched as the young man curled around the child, twisting to take the brunt of the resulting impact. He slid across the ground, and lay there, unmoving, as sirens began to wail.

#

He woke to the sound of something beeping. Michael tried to raise a hand to rub at his eyes, only to discover it had been shackled to the frame of the hospital bed. "Shit."

"Yeah, you're definitely in that." Michael looked up at the sound of the voice, and found the old man he'd pickpocketed watching him like a hawk.

The events of the previous day flooded into his mind, and he sat up.

"The kid..."

"She's fine. Singed some of her hair and bit her tongue, but otherwise she's fine." The old man leaned back in his chair.

Michael slowly lay back down. He saw bandages around his hand, but the only sensation he had was a vaguely fuzzy feeling everywhere. "Nothing said under the influence of narcotics is admissible in court."

"Well, we aren't in court, are we?" The old man folded his arms. "You were carrying almost fifty thousand in stolen goods, not to mention a forged military ID that you acquired by mugging an alliance officer." When Michael gave him an indignant look, he chuckled. "Getting your ass handed to you doesn't change that it was a mugging." He tilted his head. "Most people in your situation would have run the other way."

"Most people are smart." Michael sighed.

"According to your record, you don't turn eighteen for another two days." The old guy unfolded his arms and leaned forward. "Juvenile records get sealed."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about a kid that can hack security protocols, almost manage to hold his own against a guy with thirty years of experience on him, and who didn't hesitate a moment to risk his life and freedom to save a couple of kids." He met Michael's eyes. "I'm Admiral Steven Hackett, Alliance Navy."

"An admiral." Michael sighed. "They told me you were some administrative grunt."

Hackett laughed. "Pretty sure you could have handled some administrative grunt." He leaned back again. "Option one. You go to trial. All charges added up, you do fifteen to twenty." He lifted one hand. "Option two. You plead guilty, save the government the expense of prosecution, and do five to ten."

Michael frowned slightly. "You're offering a third door."

"I am." Hackett nodded. "Join up."

"What?"

"Sign on to the alliance military. You've got skills, kid, and you're a tough little bastard." Hackett looked him over. "And you went back into the fire twice, without hesitation."

"I need to think..." Michael shook his head. Two years and a paycheck versus rotting. Councilman Valince would make sure he never got a deal as sweet as a mere five, and he wasn't looking forward to finding out just how bad a hole the fucker could stick him into. "Where do I sign?"

#

Hackett turned to see a woman approaching him. "Admiral Hackett?"

When he nodded, she smiled and held out a hand. "Molly Breton."

"What can I do for you, Mrs. Breton?" He accepted the handshake.

"I wanted to thank you, Admiral."

"Thank me?" He blinked.

"I owe Michael Shepard my life, Admiral." She looked down the hospital corridor. "Thank you for giving him a chance." She shook her head. "He's an angry young man, but I think..." She took a deep breath. "I think he's a lot better than he thinks he is."

"That's what I'm counting on, Mrs. Breton."

#

Hackett opened the message, and chuckled to himself. Apparently, Michael Shepard had decided to set a couple records his first week at Camp Murphy. He'd broken the time record for an obstacle course, and set a new high for number of disciplinary pushups done in the course of a single day. A rather impressive four-digit number.

2. Chapter 2

He looked down at the datapad. The date stared back at him. Two years. He was a free man, with a rather nice number in his bank account. Enough to go off planet, or live somewhere far from New York. Get a real job. Maybe try his luck as a...

Michael looked at his reflection in the glass of the window. The hair that had once brushed his shoulders was now less than a quarter inch in length. He'd hated the uniform for the first couple months. Now it was hard to picture himself without it. How the hell had a hard bunk and overcooked food started to feel like home? Michael looked down at the datapad in his hand. "That geezer is going to feel so smug about this, isn't he?"

The datapad didn't respond. He tapped the keys to bring up the reenlistment form, and started filling it out.

#

He wrapped his legs around the support beam and hung out of the small shuttle. The sniper rifle felt comfortable against his shoulder. The ship jolted slightly, and he controlled his breathing, anticipating the next movement as he lined up the shot. The shuttle jittered, then went smooth again. He judged the wind, and pulled the trigger.

In the distance, the crates began exploding. Within a minute, the compound was in flames, and the pirates were fleeing in all directions. Michael pulled himself back into the ship, and grinned at the pilot. "Pay up."

"I uh..." Zavala rubbed the back of his neck. "Might be a bit short."

Bai started laughing. "So not only were you stupid enough to bet

against him, you bet with money you didn't have?"

"He made the shot." Brekin's voice was gleeful. "Fucking Shepard." He bumped his fist against Michael's.

"Land this thing." Michael grinned up at the pilot. "We've got some pirates to round up."

#

Major Kyle stared at them. Behind him, Shepard could hear Bai trying not to laugh. "Lieutenant."

"Sir?" Shepard kept his face composed.

"When you left here, it was in an alliance shuttle."

"Yes, sir."

The Major turned to look at the landing pad. "Where is my shuttle?"

"In the cargo hold, sir." Shepard stared straight ahead. Taggert was making choking sounds.

"In the cargo hold." Major Kyle nodded as his lips twitch. "Would you care to explain to me just how your team acquired a batarian frigate?"

"Carefully, sir."

Brekin lost his composure completely, and had to lean on Bai for support while he laughed. Major Kyle gave him an annoyed look before he gave up and started laughing as well.

#

Zavala smiled eagerly. "Think they'll let us keep this one?"

"I thought you liked the space ones." Michael glanced down at the pilot.

The other man pulled a lever, and the Mako launched into the air, clearing the ravine. It landed on the other side, throwing everyone against their harness. Zavala let out a whoop.

"Permission to shoot him, sir?" Brekin winced and rubbed his side.

"Granted." Michael rolled his shoulder. "Next time we are stealing something with a mass effect field."

#

"Lieutenant." Major Kyle gestured to Shepard. "Take your team to the north and get that gun offline. It's going to tear our backup apart."

"On it, sir." Shepard waved to his team, and headed towards his target. He pulled up the map on his omnitool as he moved, and let out

a small snarl. This was going to get bloody. And worse, it was going to be bloody for his team. He turned and looked over his crew before dividing them in half. "Brekin, move in around back, get the shields down. We'll head in the front with the same objective. Last one to the shields buys the drinks." He yanked his rifle out of its harness.

Nods answered the order. They knew the situation as well as he did. The best they could hope for was one of the teams to draw enough fire for the other team to get in. Half of them weren't going to make it to the bar.

#

He dropped the first of the batarians with a silent shot from his rifle, and gestured to the rest of his team. His second and third shots also took out sentries. They were in the door when they heard the sound of fire from the other half of the building.
"Fuck."

"We've got to help them." Aditi turned towards him.

"No." Michael kept his face expressionless. "We've got a mission, same as they do."

"Sir..."

"Move your ass. We don't know how much time they are going to buy us. We don't get those guns down, everyone dies here." He reloaded, and started moving again. Brekin had a girl, stationed on Arcturus. Michael headed sliced the security lock open. He'd asked Michael to be one of the groomsmen.

Batarians turned at the sound of the door opening. Michael opened fire.

#

Michael planted the charges in the shield generator and dove into cover. A few seconds later there were three small explosions, and the faint humming sound ceased.

The rear of the building had fallen silent. He'd tried the communicator, but no one had answered. "How is Monet?"

Taggert looked up from where he was applying the first aid patch. "He should be fine if we get him to medical soon."

There was the sound of footsteps coming in their direction. Michael took up position. "Just get him shooting straight."

#

The batarian held up his hands in a surrender. Michael gestured to Aditi. She and Meyer moved in carefully. Michael started to reach for his omnitool when he saw something flash in the batarian's expression. "Get down..." He grabbed Vasquez and pulled her behind cover just as the grenade exploded.

Dimly, he heard Meyer screaming. Taggert was moving towards the

wounded man. Michael started for Aditi, but a second look made it clear there was nothing to be done for her. He looked at Meyers, and realized the same was going to be true there. Meyer's leg was lying across the room, and most of his torso was just char and gore. He screamed and convulsed as Taggert tried his best.

It was almost a mercy when he went still. Michael looked at the surviving faces of his team. Taggert. Vasquez. Monet. Three. Just an hour ago, they'd been twelve. "We need to stop them from getting those guns up again. Move, people."

Their faces were fierce when they saluted.

#

Signals were coming over the communicator again. Bombs were still dropping, but it was mostly a cleanup operation now. Major Kyle radioed for him to head back to the rendezvous point.

Michael got his arm up under Monet's shoulder, letting the man lean on him as they started to make their way through the wreckage. They hadn't gone far when a dozen batarians appeared.

Their weapons came up, and immediately the batarians threw up their hands. "We surrender." The one in the lead actually had a little white flag. None of them appeared to be armed.

Meyers' screams echoed in his ears. He wasn't sure who fired the first shot.

#

Major Kyle's face looked worn and haggard. "They'd surrendered, Lieutenant." He shook his head at Michael.

"Sir..."

"I saw it, Lieutenant." Major Kyle narrowed his eyes.

"I gave the order." Michael met his eyes. "We didn't have the manpower to deal with taking prisoners in that situation, sir."

Major Kyle's tired face gave way to disgust. "I'll add that to my report, Lieutenant." He shook his head. "We'll be picked up as soon as the bombers are..."

The communicator crackled. A voice came over. "Sir..."

Michael stared at the unit, and answered. "Brekin?"

"Sir I..."

"Location."

"Rear of..." The voice was weak. "There's a red pole."

Immediately, Michael started to turn back to the building. One of the nearby MPs grabbed his arm. Major Kyle shook his head. "The bombers have already started their..."

His fist connected with the MP's jaw and he was moving. A couple others tried to grab him and he pulled his way free. He heard Major Kyle's voice calling after him. "Get back here, Lieutenant. That's an order. Shepard. Shepard!"

#

Hackett opened the cell door and stepped inside. Michael looked up from where he was sitting on the cot. He immediately got to his feet and saluted. "At ease." Hackett took a deep breath. "You going to tell me the truth, kid?"

"I stand by my official statement, sir." Michael stood in parade rest, but he didn't meet Hackett's eyes.

"Yeah." Hackett shook his head. He looked down at the datapad. "Major Kyle backed up your statement." He folded his arms, and stared at the man in front of him. Then he sighed, and shook his head. "They want to court martial you, kid."

"I have been informed, sir."

"They want to discharge you and put you in prison for a couple years." He took a deep breath. "That's not going to happen."

Michael blinked. "Sir?"

"You disobeyed a direct order." Hackett narrowed his eyes. "Your freedom, your career, your life..." He chuckled. "To go back into the fire for a survivor. And here you are again, taking the court martial so the survivors of your team don't have too. We both know you didn't give that order."

"Sir..."

"Shut up." Hackett let his arms drop to his sides. "I'm not excusing you. You may not have given the order, but you discharged your weapon same as the rest of them. I thought you better than that." He threw the datapad onto the cot. "This isn't a reward, and you damn well better get that through your thick skull. I put you down for the N7 program."

"N7, sir?"

He let the silence drag on long enough for Michael to shift awkwardly. Military regulations said Michael Shepard should be thrown out on his ass, hard enough to bounce. A waste of a talented soldier. Not to mention it would be trading a problem for one that could be far worse. Michael Shepard with no course to hold was a frightening proposition. "I think the galaxy is a lot better off with you pointed firmly at the enemy, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

Hackett started to leave the cell, then hesitated. "Son, do yourself a favor and find an anchor. Or one of these days you're going to find you are so far out to sea you've got no way back." He stepped out of the cell and closed the door behind him.

#

Anderson looked across his desk at his most recent acquisition. The N7 on the man's armor was still fresh enough to be shiny. He scrolled through the datapad. Exemplary sniper. Bypassed security systems easier than some people opened doors. Had a history of getting into fights and several incidents on record of disobeying direct orders. And Sanders had referred to the guy as a thug.

He continued scrolling, this time looking at the commendations. A thug that got the job done when no one else could.
"Shepard."

"Sir?"

"You're something of a problem child." He glanced at a note at the bottom of the file. "Most marines learn not to mouth off to their drill sergeants at some point before their pushup total hits six digits." He met the man's eyes. Fourteen years, Hackett had held onto that favor. And now he was calling it in. For the Butcher of Torfan. "Of course, most marines never achieve N7 status, least of all manage it in under a year." He gave the younger man an appraising look. "How big a headache are you going to give me, son?"

"I'm not your son, sir." Shepard met his eyes levelly.

Despite himself, he smiled. "No. You'd be a damn sight better looking if you were." He glanced one more time at the service record, then tucked the datapad into his desk. The most surprising part about the record was that despite the number of hells he'd walked through, the man kept coming back. "It seems you're my problem now."

#

"Well, what about Shepard? Earthborn..." Ambassador Udina frowned as he looked over the datapad. "But no record of his family."

"Doesn't have one. He was raised on the streets. Learned to look out for himself." Captain Anderson leaned back in his chair. He flicked his eyes to where Admiral Hackett was standing. He'd been expecting Hackett to back the suggestion.

"He got most of his unit killed on Torfan." Hackett folded his arms.

"He gets the job done." Anderson nodded in acknowledgment. Torfan had more than its share of disasters, and frankly, it had been a miracle Shepard had succeeded at all. "No matter what the cost."

Udina narrowed his eyes. "Is that the kind of person we want protecting the galaxy?"

Captain Anderson sighed. "That's the only kind of person who can protect the galaxy."

"I'll make the call." Udina took the datapad with him as he left the room.

Michael walked up to the cockpit. The Normandy still had the acrid smell of a ship fresh from the construction yard. Three days on board wasn't quite enough to grow accustomed. Mentally, he counted down the seconds. Approximately forty of them later, Nihlus joined them. Right on cue.

Joker ran down the checklist. "Drift..." He glanced at the readout. "Just under 1500 K."

"1500 is good. Your captain will be pleased." Nihlus gave the cockpit one more cursory look before heading back down the corridor.

"I hate that guy." Joker muttered.

"Nihlus gave you a compliment..." From the co-pilot chair, Alenko shook his head. "So you hate him?"

"You remember to zip up your jumpsuit on the way out of the bathroom? That's good. I just jumped us halfway across the galaxy and hit a target the size of a pinhead. So that's great." Joker shot him a glare. "Besides, Spectres are trouble. I don't like having him on board. Call me paranoid."

Alenko promptly obliged. "You're paranoid." He touched a couple buttons on his display. "The Council helped fund this project. They have a right to send someone to keep an eye on their investment."

"Yeah, that is the official story. But only an idiot believes the official story."

He shook his head, and looked down at Joker. "You always expect the worst." And the universe rarely failed to disappoint. At first he'd thought Nihlus was just hitching a ride. Now, he wasn't so sure. He just wished he knew what he and Anderson were doing here. Especially since his last shakedown run on a frigate had technically ended in him stealing it. A little.

"Well, bad feelings are an occupational hazard." Joker shrugged. "We don't go anywhere unless there's a good reason, so what are we doing here?"

Michael was about to reply when the comm unit beeped. Captain Anderson's voice came over. "Joker. Status report."

"Just cleared the mass relay, Captain. Stealth systems engaged. Everything looks solid."

"Good. Find a comm buoy and link us into the network. I want mission reports relayed back to Alliance brass before we reach Eden Prime."

"Aye, aye, Captain." Joker started hitting the buttons. "Better brace yourself, sir. I think Nihlus is headed your way."

Irritation filled Anderson's voice. "He's already here, Lieutenant." Joker winced. "Tell Commander Shepard to meet me in the comm room for a debriefing."

"You get that, Commander?"

Well, this should be fun. "Great. You piss the captain off and now I'm going to pay for it."

"Pff. Don't blame me. The captain's always in a bad mood." Joker shot him a look over his shoulder.

"Only when he's talking to you, Joker," Alenko said.

#

Jenkins was practically bouncing when Michael walked past. He slowed briefly. The corporal was from Eden Prime, if he remembered correctly. "What do you think, Commander?" Jenkins saluted. "We won't be staying on Eden Prime too long, will we? I'm itching for some real action."

Dr. Chakwas gave him a disapproving look. "I sincerely hope you're kidding, Corporal. Your 'real action' usually ends with me patching up crew members in the infirmary."

"Only a fool goes looking for a fight, Corporal." Michael inclined his head towards the doctor. Looking wasn't necessary. Sooner or later, the fights always found him.

"Sorry, Commander. But this waiting's killing me. I've never been on a mission like this before. Not one with a Spectre on board."

"Do your job, follow orders, and there won't be any problems."

"Easy for you to say." Jenkins shook his head. "You proved yourself on Torfan. Everybody knows what you can do. This is my big chance. I need to show the brass what I can do."

Last thing he needed was people following the example he'd set at Torfan. "This mission isn't about personal glory, Corporal. We have a job to do. Don't do anything stupid to mess it up."

"Don't worry, sir. I'm not going to screw this up."

"I should go." Michael headed for the debriefing room. Nice to know if nothing else, he could always serve as a bad example.

#

Nihlus was already in the debriefing room. He still wasn't sure what to make of the guy. Maybe it was the species issue, but the guy didn't quite read as 'cop'. "Commander Shepard. I was hoping you'd get here first. It will give us a chance to talk."

"The captain said he'd meet me here."

"He's on his way." Nihlus's strange eyes looked him over before the turian started pacing. "I'm interested in this world we're going to - Eden Prime. I've heard it's quite beautiful."

"I've never been there." His missions didn't typically take him to the more peaceful worlds.

"But you know of it. It's become something of a symbol for your people, hasn't it?" Nihlus stopped pacing and faced him. "Proof that humanity can not only establish colonies across the galaxy, but also protect them. But how safe is it, really?" He walked down to the vid screen, and looked at the still that showed the colony spread out before them.

Michael felt the fight instinct starting to rise. "If you've got something to say, just say it."

"Your people are still newcomers, Shepard. The galaxy can be a very dangerous place." Nihlus turned back to him and folded his arms. "Is the Alliance truly ready for this?"

Before he could respond, the door opened to admit Captain Anderson. He walked down the ramp to them. "I think it's about time we told the commander what's really going on."

"This mission is far more than a simple shakedown run." Nihlus nodded.

The surface of the sun was hot. Water was wet. Opening up your helmet in vacuum was stupid. His self-control was improving; he didn't say any of those out loud. "I already figured that out."

Captain Anderson faced him. "We're making a cover pick-up on Eden Prime. That's why we needed the stealth systems operational."

He nodded. "There must be a reason you tell me about this, sir."

"This comes down from the top, Commander. Information strictly on a need-to-know basis." He gestured sharply. "A research team on Eden Prime unearthed some kind of beacon during an excavation. It was Prothean."

Well. Shit. "What else can you tell me?"

"This is big, Shepard. The last time humanity made a discover like this, it jumped our technology forward two hundred years." Anderson waved a hand. "But Eden Prime doesn't have the facilities to handle something like this. We need to bring the beacon back to the Citadel for proper study."

Nihlus nodded to Anderson. "Obviously, this goes beyond mere human interests, Commander. This discovery could affect all species in Council space."

"But that's not why you're here." Michael narrowed his eyes.

"Well, the beacon isn't the only reason I'm here." Nihlus's mandibles moved in what he thought might have been the turian version of a smile.

"Nihlus wants to see you in action, Commander." Anderson's face was expressionless. "He's here to evaluate you."

That was slightly disconcerting. "What's going on, Captain?"

It was Anderson's turn to start pacing the small room. "The Alliance

has been pushing for this for a long time. Humanity wants a larger role in shaping interstellar policy. We want more say with the Citadel Council."

"I was impressed when I studied the results from Torfan. A grim business..." Nihlus was watching him. "But you got the job done. That's why I put your name forward as a candidate for the Spectres."

Michael blinked. He glanced from Nihlus to Anderson, and saw Anderson nod. Spectre was... Something he could deal with later, without a turian watching. "Just tell me what I have to do."

"I need to see your skills for myself, Commander. Eden Prime will be the first of several missions together."

"You'll be in charge of the ground team. Secure the beacon and get it onto the ship ASAP. Nihlus will accompany you to observe the mission."

Going in blind with a team of unknowns and someone standing over his shoulder to grade his homework. This should be fun. "Just give the word, Captain."

"We should be getting close to Eden -"

Joker's voice cut Captain Anderson off. "Captain, we've got a problem."

"What's wrong, Joker?"

"Transmission from Eden Prime, sir. You better see this."

Anderson walked down to the viewscreen. "Bring it up on screen."

The transmission showed marines fighting for their lives. Fighting, and dying. He couldn't make out what they were going up against. A woman shoved the cameraman to the ground. Pirates? An officer's face appeared in the screen. "We are under attack. Taking heavy casualties. I repeat: heave casualties. We can't..." The officer's body jerked as he took a hit to the shoulder. "Argh." He adjusted to get himself better cover. "-eed evac. They came out of nowhere. We need -" The next shot went through the man's helmet, and he fell forward, dropping the camera. It spun as it hit the ground, and there was a strange noise. Someone else picked up the camera and turned it towards a strange shape in the sky. The ship looked almost like a grasping hand, reaching down towards the colony. The screen went to static.

"Everything cuts out after that." Joker's voice came over the comm. "No comm traffic at all. Just goes dead. There's nothing."

"Reverse and hold at 38.5." Anderson stared at the strange ship. Nihlus watched silently. Anderson frowned. "Status report."

"Seventeen minutes out, Captain. No other Alliance ships in the area."

"Take us in, Joker. Fast and quiet." Anderson took a deep breath.

"This mission just got a lot more complicated.

"A small strike team can move quickly without drawing attention. It's our best chance to secure the beacon." Nihlus's mandibles made a slight clacking sound.

"Grab your gear and meet us in the cargo hold." Nihlus nodded to Anderson before moving off. Anderson turned towards Michael. "Tell Alenko and Jenkins to suit up, Commander. You're going in."

#

Michael passed the order, and grabbed his own helmet. Mentally he ran through what he knew of his new teammates. Alenko was a biotic and a trained medic, with some experience under heavy fire. He didn't have a lot of experience working with biotics, but knew enough to be glad to have one on the team. Jenkins was a rookie, with a lot of training missions under his belt and not much else. Alenko was calm. Michael was a little worried Jenkins was going to bounce out of his armor. He was about to say something when Alenko lightly punched Jenkins in the shoulder, putting an end to the bouncing.

"Somebody was doing some serious digging here, Captain." Joker's voice came over the comm.

Anderson came into the cargo hold. Michael frowned, and tapped Jenkin's harness. The rookie immediately adjusted it to sit properly. He checked Alenko's rig and noted nothing out of place.

"Your team's the muscle in this operation, Commander. Go in heavy and head straight for the dig site." Anderson gave them each his own once over.

"What about survivors, Captain?" Alenko asked.

"Helping survivors is a secondary objective. The beacon's your top priority."

"Approaching drop point one." The ship moved smoothly into position.

"Nihlus?" He could hear excitement in Jenkins' voice. "You're coming with us?"

Nihlus checked over his weapon. "I move faster on my own." He exited the ship, leaping off the ramp to the planet below.

"Nihlus will scout out ahead." Anderson continued giving orders. "He'll feed you status reports throughout the mission. Otherwise, I want radio silence."

"Ready and able, sir." He wasn't sure how he felt about putting his hands in the life of a turian. Though it was likely Nihlus wasn't going to do anything that might jeopardize the beacon.

"The mission's yours now, Shepard. Good luck."

#

"Stay low." Michael glanced at Jenkins.

They hadn't gone far when they saw the first bodies. They were almost too charred to be recognizable as human. The stench of burned meat wafted up on the breeze. He saw Jenkins turn a little green. He bent to examine one of the bodies. No sign of weapon or armor. Civilian then, not one of the marines he'd seen on the vid. A serious case of overkill.

"Oh god, what happened here?"

Michael continued moving, scanning the horizon. If it was pirates, there would be mines or other traps, but he wasn't detecting anything. He held up a fist to signal the others to be on guard. This situation wasn't reading right. He signaled them to move forward carefully.

Jenkins was up too high again. The kid was... Something started firing. Jenkins cried out and was falling almost before Michael could get the target in his sights. A drone. He blasted it out of the sky and was moving to the next target. He and Alenko hit it simultaneously. It exploded in a shower of sparks and debris.

He signaled Alenko, moving in to provide cover as the other man moved towards the downed Jenkins. A moment later, Alenko was shaking his head and reaching up to close Jenkins' eyes. "Ripped right through his shields. Never had a chance."

The two men had been friends. "We'll see that he receives a proper service once the mission is complete. But I need you to stay focused." The temptation to run off and avenge a friend was a strong one. And they didn't have enough information to risk that kind of thing.

"Aye, aye, sir."

#

They hadn't gone much further when they saw a marine running for her life. And two synthetic creatures had hold of a man in civilian clothes. The man was moving, abet weakly. The synthetic laid the man over some sort of... A spike shot up from the device, lifting the civilian into the air to twitch obscenely.

The first shot from his sniper rifle blew the head of one of the synthetics apart. The marine immediately took advantage of the distraction to stop running and dive for cover. She came up shooting. A blue glow surrounded Alenko as he used his biotics to throw a nearby creature into an outcropping of rocks before drawing his sidearm.

Michael scoped his next target, trusting the biotic to watch his back. The marine kept firing, drawing the synthetics to her position. He took out several more before they stopped coming over the hill, then checked his display. Other than himself and the other two soldiers, there was nothing moving nearby. He made his way to the marine.

She stood, and her eyes went briefly to his rank insignia. "Thanks for your help, Commander. I didn't think I was going to make it." She

saluted. "Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams of the 212. You the one in charge here, sir?"

He gestured for Alenko to check out her injuries. "Give me a status report, Williams."

"Oh man..." Williams let Alenko check out the graze on her arm. "We were patrolling the perimeter when the attack hit." She pointed. "We tried to get off a distress call, but they cut off our communications. I've been fighting for my life ever since."

"Any idea what kind of enemy we're facing?" Clearly synthetic, but...

"I think they're geth." Williams looked a bit wide-eyed. He couldn't blame her. Geth. Prothean beacons. Turian spectres. How had he pissed Anderson off this time?

Alenko put his medical kit away. "The geth haven't been seen outside the Veil in nearly 200 years. Why are they here now?"

"They must have come for the beacon." Williams shrugged. "The dig site is close. Just over that rise. It might still be there." She pointed.

How had they even known the beacon was here? "You're coming with us, Williams. We need that beacon."

Her smile was fierce. "Aye, aye, sir. It's time for payback."

They started moving. He questioned her a bit as they headed for the dig site. She hadn't seen Nihlus, and didn't know much more than he did about the beacon. And it was clear none of the rest of her team had survived. He signaled to let Nihlus know about the geth, only to discover the turian had just had his own encounter.

#

There were geth at the dig site. He managed to drop a few with the rifle before the geth got close enough for his companions to join the fray. Williams seemed to find it amusing to shoot the geth Alenko tossed into the air. It didn't take the three of them long to find a rhythm.

Once the geth were done, they headed in to find... nothing. Williams looked around. "This is the dig site. The beacon was right here. It must have been moved."

"By who?" Alenko asked. "Our side? Or the geth?"

"Hard to say. Maybe we'll know more after we check out the research camp." Williams shrugged.

Michael was looking for tracks when his comm unit beeped. Nihlus's voice came over. "Change of plans, Shepard. There's a small spaceport up ahead. I want to check it out."

"The beacon's been moved. We're on our way there." Michael replied.

"I'll meet you there." The comm unit clicked off.

#

They found two civilians in the lab who were able to tell them about the beacon being moved. Though one appeared to have been hit in the head. Either that, or he'd been drinking on the job. Michael told them to stay put until the area had been secured, then relocked the door.

Halfway to the spaceport, one of the strange spikes suddenly released, sliding back down. The corpse that had been atop it was riddled with strange blue wiring. As soon as the spike finished retracting, the corpse started moving.

"Oh god, they're still alive." Alenko stared. "What did the geth do to them?"

Michael put a shot between the thing's eyes at it started attacking. He just hoped there wasn't anything human left in it. The alternative was unthinkable.

#

A shot rang out somewhere in the distance. Michael listened, but heard no more. Nihlus taking out a sentry? He frowned, and kept moving. As they passed a shed, he heard a small creaking noise, and signaled his companions. They took up positions as he started opening the lock.

As soon as the door creaked open, a voice spoke up from the back of the shed. "Everybody stay calm out there. We're coming out. We're not armed." Michael stepped back as three civilians came to the doorway.

The woman among them looked around, her eyes wide. "Is it safe? Are they gone?"

"Nobody moves a muscle until we know who you are." Michael looked them over.

"Nice going, Cole. I told you we should've stayed hidden." The second man shook his head.

The first man, Cole apparently, held up his hands. "It's okay. We're all on the same side here. We're just farmers. We've been hiding ever since that ship first showed up."

Michael shot a look at Williams, who gave him the barest of nods. He returned the nod, then questioned them on what they'd seen. They added unfortunately all too little to the researchers report other than the ship had broadcast some sort of strange signal. He was about to take his leave when the second man spoke up again. "Hey, Cole. We're just a bunch of farmers. These guys are soldiers. Maybe we should give them the stuff."

"Geez, Blake. You gotta learn when to shut up." Cole glared.

"If there's something you're not telling me..." Michael narrowed his eyes.

Cole swallowed nervously. "Some guys at the spaceport were running a small smuggling ring. Nothing major. In exchange for a cut of the profits, we let them store packages in our sheds."

Smugglers. No wonder word of the beacon had reached the geth. Information was always worth more than goods. "You greedy bastard. You weren't running for your life. You were running to check on your merchandise."

"No. It's not like that. I just..." Cole held up his hands. "I just knew there were some packages here. Something we could use. I found a pistol. Figured it would come in handy if those things came back. But you'll probably get more use out of it than we will." He handed Michael the pistol.

Michael glanced at it, then passed it to Alenko. It was a slight improvement to the one the biotic was currently using. Cole was doing the thing where he tried to look someone in the eye just a little too hard to prove his sincerity. Rookie mistake. "I'm only going to ask this once. Think long and hard before you lie to me again. Are you sure all you've got is one lousy pistol?"

"Uh..." Cole rubbed his forehead. "Oh, wait. I just remembered. I just had it in my pocket. Might as well take that, too. That's everything. Really."

A combat scanner, a fair sight nicer than the one he was currently using. Not bad. Next to him, Williams was still furious. "Who's your contact at the spaceport, Cole? What's his name?"

"He's not a bad guy. I don't want to get him in trouble. Besides, I'm not a snitch."

Amateur. The smart thing to do would have been to give a false name. Michael put a hand on his pistol. "Would you rather be a snitch or a corpse?"

The answer came almost before he'd finished asking the question. "Powell. His name's Powell."

Williams smirked. "No honor among thieves." He kind of resented that remark.

Cole was backing up. "That's all I know. Really. So let's try to keep things friendly from here on in, okay?"

Michael shrugged. "I have to go."

As soon as they were out of earshot, Alenko shook his head. "Was scaring the civilians necessary?"

"Smugglers gossip worse than cadets." Michael glanced back at the shed. "There is a chance we can trace the leak. If nothing else, we need to shut down the operation." He glanced down at the scanner before affixing it to his gear. "This is military grade."

"Assholes." Williams glared.

#

He could see geth moving around at the spaceport. "As soon as I start taking out the geth, those..." Michael glanced at the spikes. "Husks are going to start moving. Take up position and cover me." He unslung his sniper rifle.

Alenko and Williams moved into position. Michael took cover, then peered out through the scope. He did a quick headcount to chose his targets, and caught sight of the containment unit. The edge of his mouth lifted slightly as he touched the trigger. The explosion took out the nearby geth. The remaining two were looking around when he took the head off one. The second dove for cover. As soon as it peered out, he sniped it, then shifted the barrel to take out one of the husks.

The rifle dropped, and he grabbed his pistol as he turned to back up his companions. It proved unnecessary. Williams had just taken out the last of the husk things, aided by Alenko's barrier. One of the husks was still floating lazily through the ravine. "Nice."

Williams grinned.

#

"Sir, it's Nihlus." Alenko moved to check the fallen turian, reaching for his medical kit as he did so.

Williams snapped her rifle into position. "Something's moving. Over behind those crates."

Michael moved in to guard Alenko, aiming his pistol as he did.

"Wait. Don't -" The human held up his hands. "Don't shoot. I'm one of you. I'm human."

He lowered his weapon, but didn't holster it. Alenko glanced up at him and shook his head before rising from Nihlus's corpse. Michael sighed, then looked back up at the dockworker. "I like the way you hid behind those crates during the fight. Really helped us out. Thanks a lot." From here, he could see where Nihlus had been shot in the back of the head. Even a small warning would have helped.

"Me? But..." The man swallowed. "But I'm just a dockworker. I don't even have a weapon." He touched his chest. "My name's Powell. I saw what happened to that turian. The other one shot him."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Michael flicked his eyes to the dead spectre before looking back at the dockworker. What other one?

"There were two turians here. Your friend and another one he called Saren. I think they knew each other." He gestured. "Your friend seemed to relax. He let his guard down..." Powell lifted his hands. "And Saren killed him. Shot him right in the back. I'm just lucky he didn't see me behind the crates."

Well. Shit. "Where'd Saren go after he killed Nihlus?"

Powell pointed. "He jumped on the cargo train and headed over to the other platform. Probably going after the beacon." He leaned on the crate. "I knew that beacon was trouble. Everything's gone to hell since we found it. First that damn mother ship showed up. Then the attack. They killed everyone. Everyone. If I hadn't been behind the crates I'd be dead, too."

"You're Cole's contact here on the docks. For the smuggling ring."

"What? No. I mean..." Powell sighed. "What does it matter now? So I'm a smuggler? Who cares? My supervisor's dead. The entire crew's dead. It doesn't matter now, does it?"

Except for the part where it was three of them against a lot of geth. "Anything hidden nearby that we could use against the geth?"

Immediately, Powell nodded. "A shipment of grenades came through last week. Nobody notices if a few small pieces go missing from the military orders."

Williams took a half step forward. "You greedy son of a bitch. We're out here trying to protect your sorry ass and all you can think about is how you can rip us off?"

Powell recoiled. "I never thought you'd actually need those grenades. Who'd want to attack Eden Prime? We're just a bunch of farmers. How was I supposed to know?"

It was tempting to just let Williams shoot the guy. "Hand over those grenades, now."

"They're yours." Powell scrambled to retrieve them. He glanced from Williams to Michael before handing them to Alenko. "Take them. My smuggling days are over. I swear."

Why did they always think they needed to stare intently into your eyes when they lied? These 'criminal masterminds' would last about fifteen seconds on Earth. "Too many people died here for you to start jerking me around."

"Okay." Powell's hands went back up. "There was something else. Could be worth a fortune. Experimental technology. Top of the line. Take it. I don't need it. I didn't want anyone to get hurt. Really. I'm sorry."

This time, he thought the guy was actually telling the truth. He gestured. "We need to find that beacon before it's too late."

#

Geth were swarming the passenger tram. He signaled Alenko and Williams into position before reaching for his sniper rifle. A geth was taking aim with a missile launcher. He put his slug into the launcher before it could fire, and it obliged him by exploding in the geth's hands, taking out it and the geth next to it. He scoped the next one, taking it out before it could get to the tram's controls.

He felt a strange hum that he was starting to realize was Alenko using biotics nearby. Out of the corner of his eye he saw geth go flying, giving Williams room to close and go to work with a shotgun and her new grenade collection. It was possible the gunny was working out some issues.

More geth coming their way. He put a slug into the head of the one in back and was scoping the next one before it even realized it had lost its backup.

#

"Explosive charges."

"Cover me." Michael slid in and began disabling the device. There were enough explosives in this thing to level the spaceport, and from the signal on his viewport, this wasn't the only one. Nothing like disarming a bomb while being shot at by geth to get the blood flowing.

Alenko held a barrier while Williams returned fire. He finished quickly, then snapped the sniper rifle up to his shoulder. With Alenko's barrier backing him up, he put two slugs into the geth moving in on Williams. "Move."

#

The countdown on the fourth bomb came to a stop. He held his breath just for a moment, but nothing reactivated. The bombs were a rush job, they clearly hadn't expected anyone to be in a position to mess with them. Michael glanced at his combat scanner, but something was still jamming the signal.

He gestured for his teammates to move forward carefully. Williams took point, freeing Michael up to move into a sniper's position. There were geth moving around the beacon, and more of the husk things. He signaled Williams to focus on the husks before scoping the first of the geth. Alenko took up a cover position where he could watch both of their backs. A few fights in, and they were moving like they'd been working together a year.

Michael fired, and the geth's head exploded into a shower of sparks. The others immediately started reaching for weapons.

#

The scanner showed no more signs of trouble. Michael reached for his communicator. "Normandy, the beacon is secure. Request immediate evac."

As he listened to the response, Williams and Alenko began looking around. "This is amazing. Actual working Prothean technology. Unbelievable." Alenko stared at the beacon. It was glowing faintly with a green light.

Williams tilted her head as she looked it over. "It wasn't doing anything like that when they dug it up." She picked up the rifle one of the geth had dropped, and started back toward Michael's location.

Alenko was still staring at the beacon. "Something must have activated it."

"Roger, Normandy. Standing by." Michael turned towards Williams, looking at the rifle she was holding. He accepted it, looking it over with a critical eye. Behind Williams, Alenko was moving closer to the beacon. He frowned. Something was off. Alenko was moving strangely, as if the beacon was pulling him. The green glow increased.

He lunged forward just as Alenko began rising into the air, tackling the other man to the ground. There was a surge, like electricity in his armor. He threw Alenko clear just before his own body went rigid. Something pulled at him, drawing him towards the beacon. He heard Alenko's voice just as some strange force lifted him into the air. "Shepard."

"No. Don't touch him. It's too dangerous." William's voice echoed strangely right before his senses were overwhelmed.

Images and sensations flooded, too fast for him to make sense of them. Blood and oil. Scattered circuits and bones. A firefight, and burned corpses as far as the eye could see. Lush planets reduced to wastelands, people burned down as they fled. Synthetics opening fire. Faster and faster, until he couldn't make sense of the images at all. And some strange noise, the scream of metal on metal.

Then nothing.

4. Chapter 4

Kaidan scanned his report before saving it, and leaned back in his chair. He glanced over at the empty bunk above his. It still hadn't quite sunk in. A simple shakedown cruise and an easy covert pickup, and now Jenkins was dead.

He looked down at the report again. And he'd gotten too close to a Prothean beacon. The ship's XO, an N7 who had gotten his nickname by executing unarmed prisoners, was in the medical bay in who knew what kind of shape. The 'Butcher of Torfan'. Frankly, he wasn't sure how much trouble he was in at the moment. Angering a guy who scared the shit out of Batarians wasn't exactly a smart thing to do.

Might as well head down to the medical bay to see just how bad things were going to get.

#

His head was swimming. The sensation was more seasick than pleasant. Carefully, he opened his eyes, only to be rewarded with a vague blur. Michael blinked to clear it.

"Doctor? Doctor Chakwas? I think he's waking up." It took him a moment to recognize Alenko's voice. Slowly, the medical bay was coming into focus. He sat up. His head felt like it was about to fall off.

Doctor Chakwas walked into view. "You had us worried there, Shepard. How are you feeling?"

"Like the morning after shore leave." He rubbed his forehead. It was fading. "How long was I out?"

"About fifteen hours. Something happened down there with the beacon, I think."

"It's my fault." He glanced over his shoulder to see Alenko looking like a man reporting to his own funeral. "I must have triggered some kind of security field when I approached. You had to push me out of the way."

The memories were starting to return. "You had no way to know what would happen." Frankly, he still wasn't sure what had happened. Alenko gave him a nervous smile.

"Actually, we don't even know if that's what set it off." Dr. Chakwas moved so she could peer into his eyes. "Unfortunately, we'll never get the chance to find out."

Alenko walked over to join them. "The beacon exploded. A system overload, maybe. The blast knocked you cold. Williams and I had to carry you back here to the ship."

"Appreciate it." He nodded to Alenko.

"Physically, you're fine." Doctor Chakwas set her scanner down. "But I detected some unusual brain activity. Abnormal beta waves." She folded her arms. "I also noticed an increase in your rapid eye movement, signs typically associated with intense dreaming."

"I saw -" The images that had flashed had been nightmarish. Worse than usual, and certainly more alien. "I'm not sure what I saw. Death. Destruction. Nothing's really clear."

"Hmmm. I better add this to my report. It may -" She cut off at the sound of the door opening. "Oh, Captain Anderson."

"How's our XO holding up, Doctor?" Anderson walked up to where he was sitting on the hospital bed.

"All the readings look normal. I'd say the commander's going to be fine." Doctor Chakwas nodded.

"Glad to hear it. Shepard, I need to speak with you." Anderson looked around the sickbay. "In private."

"Aye, aye, Captain." Alenko saluted. "I'll be in the mess if you need me." Doctor Chakwas followed him out.

Anderson looked him over. "Sounds like that beacon hit you pretty hard, Commander. You sure you're okay?"

"Might have finally found the one thing in the galaxy that hits harder than Admiral Hackett, sir." Michael stood up. The dizzy feeling had gone, and was slowly being replaced by anger. Jenkins had been killed down there. "I don't like soldiers dying under my command."

"Jenkins wasn't your fault." Anderson immediately shook his head.

"You did a good job, Shepard."

In a good job, everyone made it home. He sighed, then frowned. "Did we leave Chief Williams back on Eden Prime?"

"I figured we could use a soldier like her. She's been reassigned to the Normandy." Anderson was watching him for a reaction.

The real question is what was a soldier like her doing someplace like Eden Prime? Williams could have kept up with Bai. "Williams is a good soldier. She deserves it."

"Lieutenant Alenko agrees with you. That's why I added her to our crew." Anderson nodded.

He looked down, then shook his head and clenched his fists. "Intel dropped the ball, sir. We had no idea what we were walking into down there. That's why things went to hell."

"The geth haven't been outside the Veil in two centuries, Commander." Anderson held up a hand. "Nobody could have predicted this."

Michael took a few deep breaths. They helped. A little. "You said you needed to see me in private, Captain?" He'd been sent to pick up a beacon, and had apparently ended up destroying the thing. And a council Spectre was dead. Somebody's ass was going to get chewed for this.

"I won't lie to you, Shepard." The captain dropped the formality. "Things look bad. The beacon was destroyed and geth are invading. The Council's going to want answers."

"The Council can kiss my ass." A geth invasion wasn't something even he could pull off. Probably. "I won't let them blame me for losing the beacon. I didn't do anything wrong."

"I'll stand behind you and your report, Shepard." Anderson nodded. "You're a damn hero in my books. That's not why I'm here. It's Saren, that other turian." Anderson turned around, and paced a few steps. "Saren's a Spectre, one of the best. A living legend. But if he's working with the geth, it means he's gone rogue. A rogue Spectre's trouble. Saren's dangerous. And he hates humans."

Well, this human was perfectly willing to hate him right back. "Why?"

"He thinks we're growing too fast, taking over the galaxy. A lot of aliens think that way. Most of them don't do anything about it." Anderson turned back towards him. "But Saren has allied himself with the geth. I don't know how. I don't know why. I only know it had something to do with that beacon." He frowned. "You were there just before the beacon self-destructed. Did you see anything? Any clue that might tell us what Saren was after?"

Nothing that didn't sound crazy. If it had been anyone other than Anderson asking, he might have denied it completely. But Anderson usually called him on the bullshit. "Just before I lost consciousness, I had some kind of vision."

"A vision? A vision of what?" Anderson started pacing again.

Michael leaned against the hospital bed. "I saw synthetics. Geth, maybe. Slaughtering people. Butchering them."

"We need to report this to the Council, Shepard."

He banged his fists into the sides of the hospital bed. "They'll think I'm crazy." And they might not be wrong.

"We don't know what information was stored in that beacon. Lost Prothean technology? Blueprints for some ancient weapon of mass destruction? Whatever it was, Saren took it." Anderson faced him, staring him in the eye. "But I know Saren. I know his reputation, his politics. He believes humans are a blight on the galaxy. This attack was an act of war." He approached, leaning on the hospital bed just a couple feet from Michael. "He has the secrets from the beacon. He has an army of geth at his command. And he won't stop until he's wiped humanity from the face of the galaxy."

Sounded like a problem he could solve with a good scope. Anderson might not care for wetwork, but it would solve the problem. "I'll find some way to take him down."

From the look on Anderson's face, he'd caught on to what Michael was thinking. He shook his head. "It's not that easy. He's a Spectre. He can go anywhere, do almost anything. That's why we need the Council on our side."

Michael sighed. After four years, Anderson was still trying to teach him diplomacy. The man really was an incorrigible optimist. "When have they ever done anything for humanity?"

"If we expose Saren as a traitor, the Council will revoke his Spectre status." Anderson tapped his fist against his palm. "I'll contact the ambassador and see if he can get us an audience with the Council. He'll want to see us as soon as we reach the Citadel." He took a deep breath, then shrugged his formality back on. "We should be getting close. Head up to the bridge and tell Joker to bring us in to dock."

"Yes, sir."

#

Alenko was leaning on the wall next to the mess table. He looked up when Michael left the infirmary, and immediately straightened up. He still looked apprehensive. "Commander. I'm glad to see you're okay. Losing Jenkins was hard on the crew. And I'm glad we didn't lose you, too."

Michael nodded. Jenkins and Alenko had been friends. "Things were pretty rough down there."

"Yeah, you never get used to seeing dead civilians. Doesn't seem right, somehow." Alenko shook his head. "But at least you stopped Saren from wiping out the whole colony."

"I couldn't have done it without you." He'd only worked with a couple biotics, but they hadn't been able to manage half of what Alenko had been tossing around. And they'd followed orders for shit.

"We're marines. We stick together." Alenko gave a brief smile before his face fell again. "I'm just sorry we lost Jenkins."

"Yeah..." If he'd had any hint of the geth at all... He'd been watching for pirates and mines. Snipers, not drones. "I wish I could've done something to save him."

"I was there." Alenko nodded. "You did everything right. It was just bad luck." He sighed. "It's been a hell of a shakedown cruise. Our first mission ends with one Spectre killing another. The Citadel Council's not going to be happy about that. Probably use it to lever more concessions out of the Alliance."

He smirked. "You've got a good grasp of the situation." He looked Alenko over. "You a career man?"

"Yeah. A lot of biotics are." Alenko shrugged. "We're not restricted, but we sure don't go undocumented. May as well get a paycheck for it." He twitched a shoulder. "Besides, my father served. Made him proud when I enlisted. Eventually." He hesitated. "But is that why you're here? Because of your family?"

"I'm here because Admiral Hackett is a surprisingly fast runner." Michael saw a confused look in Alenko's eyes, and decided not to elaborate. The LT was just starting to lose the nervous look around the eyes.

Alenko looked around briefly, then lowered his voice a bit. "Word is we're headed for the Citadel, sir. Can you tell me why?"

He briefly considered just saying Alenko would find out soon enough. But the guy'd had his back and carried him out. That counted for a lot. "The captain hopes the Ambassador can get an audience with the Council. Tell them what Saren's been up to."

"Makes sense. They'd probably like to know he's not working for them anymore." Alenko straightened to a more military stance. "Whatever happens, we'll be ready, Commander."

Michael nodded before continuing on.

#

He watched Shepard head over to check on Chief Williams. Given the guy's reputation, he'd expected... Kaidan frowned to himself. To get yelled at, at the very least. Not for the guy to be actually nice about the whole thing. According to Jenkins, Shepard had at least one court martial for breaking the arm of an MP. Or had it been a superior officer? He'd have to ask... Damn. He needed to write a letter to Jenkins' family.

#

"I'm glad you're okay, Commander. The crew could use some good news after what happened to Jenkins." Chief Williams spoke up as soon as she saw him.

"Jenkins was a valuable part of this crew." He'd only talked to the kid a couple times. Eager and enthusiastic, the kind who'd make a

good soldier. If they made it.

"Part of me feels guilty over what happened. If Jenkins was still alive, I might not be here."

Doubtful. Anderson didn't waste talent or skill. Which was probably the only reason he still had a job. "You're a good soldier, Williams. You belong on the Normandy."

Her smile was bright. "Thanks, Commander. I appreciate that."

"Things were pretty rough down there." She'd lost her whole squad. "Are you okay?"

"I've seen friends die before. Comes with being a marine. But to see my whole unit wiped out..." She looked down. "And you never get used to seeing dead civilians. But things would have been a lot worse if you hadn't shown up."

"We couldn't have done it without you, Williams."

She lifted her head. "Thanks, Commander. I have to admit, I was a little worried about being assigned to the Normandy. It's nice when someone makes you feel welcome."

He'd seen her in a fight. She was brave, tough, skilled, and just a tiny bit crazy. "I think you're going to fit in here just fine, Williams."

"Thanks, Commander."

#

Williams and Alenko came up to the cockpit as they headed into the Citadel. From the looks on their faces, he doubted either had ever been before. Not that he was overly familiar with the place. Last time had been when Anderson had loaned him back to Hackett for a run on a makeshift warlord out in Hawking Eta. Hackett hadn't let him out of his sight the whole time they were on the station. He'd claimed it was because he was worried Michael was going to steal the place. Michael had pointed out it would take a team of at least twenty. Somehow, learning he'd actually thought about it enough to have a rough plan hadn't reassured Hackett all that much. Besides, the last time he'd stolen a space station had been because Hackett had asked him to. Sort of.

Anderson ordered Williams and Alenko to join them as they left the Normandy and made their way to the embassies. Having to walk through C-Sec to get there made him a little nervous. Even out in space, a cop was a cop.

They arrived to find Ambassador Udina deep in argument with the council. "This is an outrage. The Council would step in if the geth attacked a turian colony."

The Salarian Councilor's voice held more than a small amount of condescension. "The turians don't found colonies on the borders of the Terminus Systems, Ambassador."

At least the Asari tried to sound soothing when she proved to be completely useless. "Humanity was well aware of the risks when you went into the Traverse."

Ambassador Udina lowered his head belligerently. "What about Saren? You can't just ignore a rogue Spectre. I demand action."

"You don't get to make demands of the Council, Ambassador." The Turian councilor shook his head.

"Citadel Security is investigating your charges against Saren." The Asari councilor's voice was firm. "We will discuss the C-Sec findings at the hearing. Not before." She reached forward to touch something out of sight, and the holographic representations of the councilors vanished.

Udina turned towards them. "Captain Anderson. I see you brought half your crew with you."

"Just the ground team from Eden Prime. In case you had questions."

"I have the mission reports." Irritation dripped from every one of Udina's words. "I assume they're accurate?"

"They are." Anderson nodded. "Sounds like you convinced the Council to give us an audience."

"They were not happy about it. Saren's their top agent. They don't like him being accused of treason." Udina gave Anderson an accusatory look.

"I'm not going to sit on my ass just because the Council doesn't want to do anything." Michael could feel his blood starting to heat. Fucking politicians never changed. Let their own do what they want, and to hell with those who suffered for it. "If they won't stop Saren, I will."

"Settle down, Commander." Udina glared at him. "You've already done more than enough to jeopardize your candidacy for the Spectres." He shook his head. "The mission on Eden Prime was a chance to prove you could get the job done. Instead, Nihlus ended up dead and the beacon was destroyed."

They couldn't be serious about the Spectre thing, could they? Anderson immediately stepped forward, holding up a hand. "That's Saren's fault, not his."

"Then we better hope the C-Sec investigation turns up evidence to support our accusations." Udina gestured sharply. "Otherwise the Council might use this as an excuse to keep you out of the Spectres." Udina jerked his head. "Come with me, Captain. I want to go over a few things before the hearing." He looked back at Michael. "Shepard - you and the others can meet us at the Citadel Tower. Top level. I'll make sure you have clearance to get in." Udina walked away.

Anderson shot Michael a look before following. He knew that look. Behave yourself, try not to set anything on fire, and don't steal the silverware.

Williams watched Udina leave. "And that's why I hate politicians."

"Right." He smoothly pocketed an old-fashioned letter opener and headed out of the embassy.

#

The Council chambers were the usual overwrote political affair. Grudgingly and with a gun to his head, he might admit the trees were kind of pretty. Whole place smelled like cleaning solution. Two turians were arguing at the top of the stairs. One wore a C-Sec uniform. The one in civilian clothes didn't need the uniform.

"Saren's hiding something. Give me more time. Stall them." The one in uniform was all but shaking his fist.

"Stall the Council? Don't be ridiculous." The other one, the boss one, shook his head. The mandibles clacked slightly. "Your investigation is over." He waved a hand as he walked away. Ah. That kind of cop. Great.

The uniform started to walk away, and noticed them coming up the stairs. "Commander Shepard? Garrus Vakarian. I was the officer in charge of the C-Sec investigation into Saren."

Best to figure out all the players. "Who were you just talking to?"

Vakarian sent a glare in the direction of the disappearing guy. "That was Executor Pallin, head of Citadel Security. My boss. He'll be presenting my findings on Saren to the Council."

That was fast. Clearly too fast. Hell, first time he'd been arrested, it had taken them two days to even figure out who he was. "Come across anything I should know about?"

"Saren's a Spectre." Vakarian folded his arms. "Most of his activities are classified. I couldn't find anything solid." He shook his head angrily. "But I know he's up to something. Like you humans say, I feel it in my gut."

He was about to ask Vakarian some more questions when Alenko tapped his arm. "I think the Council's ready for us, Commander."

"Good luck, Shepard." Vakarian stepped aside to let them pass. "Maybe they'll listen to you."

And maybe the next planet they surveyed would have flying pigs.

#

Anderson was waiting for them. "The hearing's already started. Come on."

They followed him up the stairs. Michael felt a moment of annoyance when he realized Saren was only present in holographic form. Though at least now he had a vague idea of what the guy looked like. Pretty

much just like every other turian he'd met. Udina was arguing with the councilors. And losing. Pretty much as expected.

The Council dismissed the dockworker's testimony. Might have been because the man was a smuggler, but he felt it was more likely it was because the guy was human. At least on the salarian's end. The turian seemed like he was simply backing his home team. It was a bit harder to get a read on the asari.

"I resent these accusations. Nihlus was a fellow Spectre. And a friend." Saren's hologram glared down at them.

"That just let you catch him off guard."

"Captain Anderson. You always seem to be involved when humanity makes false charges against me." Saren unfolded his arms. "And this must be your protege, Commander Shepard. The one who let the beacon get destroyed."

Oh. Was it time for his line already? Maybe he should have read the script. It was growing clear that the Council had made up their minds before the hearing had started. "You're the one who destroyed the beacon. Then you tried to cover it up."

"Shift the blame to cover your own failures, just like Captain Anderson. He's taught you well." He was pretty sure the turian was smirking. "But what can you expect from a human?"

Michael clenched his fists. Anderson wasn't to blame for any of this shit. "You can expect me to kill you next time we meet."

"Your species needs to learn its place, Shepard. You're not ready to join the Council. You're not even ready to join the Spectres."

Udina immediately leapt back into the fray. "He has no right to say that. That's not his decision."

The asari councilor turned and looked up at Saren. "Shepard's admission into the Spectres is not the purpose of this meeting."

Saren waved dismissively. "This meeting has no purpose. The humans are wasting your time, Councilor. And mine."

"You can't hide behind the Council forever." Michael might have said something else, but Anderson stepped forward.

"There is still one outstanding issue: Commander Shepard's vision. It may have been triggered by the beacon."

"Are we allowing dreams into evidence now? How can I defend my innocence against this kind of testimony?"

"I agree." The turian councilor shifted his weight. "Our judgment must be based on facts and evidence, not wild imaginings and reckless speculation."

"Do you have anything else to add, Commander Shepard?" The salarian councilor blinked his large eyes.

That tossing in a grenade and then going for beer would have done more good than attending the meeting? "You've made your decision. I won't waste my breath."

A couple small glances were exchanged by the councilors, but they didn't bother to discuss anything. Which just proved his point. The asari councilor spoke. "The Council has found no evidence of any connection between Saren and the geth. Ambassador, your petition to have him disbarred from the Spectres is denied."

"I'm glad to see justice was served." Saren's hologram vanished.

"This meeting is adjourned."

#

Udina immediately began chewing them out. "It was a mistake bringing you into that hearing, Captain. You and Saren have too much history. It made the Council question our motives."

Anderson rolled his eyes, and turned towards Michael. "I know Saren. He's working with the geth for one reason: to exterminate the entire human race." He gestured. "Every colony we have is at risk. Every world we control is in danger. Even Earth isn't safe."

"We need to deal with Saren ourselves." Finding out his location was going to be the hard part.

"As a Spectre, he's virtually untouchable. We need to find some way to expose him." Udina tapped his chin.

Alenko spoke up. "What about Garrus, that C-Sec investigator? We saw him arguing with the executor."

Williams nodded. "That's right. He was asking for more time to finish his report. Seems like he was close to finding something on Saren."

Worth a try. "Any idea where we could find him?"

"I have a contact in C-Sec who can help us track Garrus down. His name is Harken."

"Forget it." Anderson shook his head at Udina. "They suspended Harkin last month. Drinking on the job. I won't waste my time with that loser."

"You won't have to." Udina folded his arms and glared at Anderson. "I don't want the Council using your past history with Saren as an excuse to ignore anything we turn up. Shepard will handle this."

Michael straightened. "You can't just cut Captain Anderson out of this investigation."

"The ambassador's right." Anderson held up a hand. "I need to step aside."

"I need to take care of some business." Udina nodded. "Captain, meet

me in my office later."

He brushed by Udina as the man walked away before turning his attention back to Anderson. Anderson sighed. "Harkin's probably getting drunk at Chora's Den. It's a dingy little club in the lower section of the wards."

"Maybe there's another way to find evidence against Saren." Playing cop wasn't exactly one of his specialties.

"You should talk to Barla Von. Over in the financial district. Rumor has it he's an agent for the Shadow Broker."

"The Shadow Broker?" Williams raised an eyebrow.

"An information dealer. Buys and sells secrets to the highest bidder. I've heard Barla Von's one of the top representatives." Anderson clasped his hands behind his back. "He might know something about Saren. But his information won't come cheap."

"I should go." Michael nodded to Anderson. Anderson returned the nod, and Michael started heading out of the council chambers. He casually tossed Udina's cufflink into one of the fountains before heading to the transportation terminal.

5. Chapter 5

"Let's see if we can't locate Harkin." Shepard started walking back towards the transport kiosk.

Kaidan hesitated briefly. "What about Barla Von, sir?"

"You heard Anderson. He's expensive, and I don't think the Council is going to reimburse us for this." Shepard shook his head. "I doubt they are even going to validate our parking. And sticking a gun in the face of one of the Shadow Broker's reps is stupid even for me."

"Just a thought, sir..." Kaidan followed him to the kiosk. "You could try asking nicely. Maybe saying please?" Williams stared at him. He mentally kicked himself. Shepard had just cussed out some of the most powerful people in the galaxy. Maybe provoking him wasn't a good idea.

Shepard turned to face him. "Please?" He tilted his head. "That's one of those strange Canadian concepts, isn't it?"

"Right." Kaidan shrugged, and figured if he was this deep in the hole, he might as well keep digging. "Along with apologies and beer that tastes good."

An amused sound came from Shepard, and he patted Kaidan on the shoulder before gently shoving him towards the just arrived taxi. "Alright, Alenko. Let's go see Barla Von." He shrugged "Any idea where to start looking?"

"He's probably in the financial district." Kaidan tried to hide a smile.

"There is an Avina kiosk." Williams gestured.

"Let's head to the financial district and track him down."

#

"I once had to take out some pirates on Desigo." Michael looked around the clean white park with its lush planters. "Swamps filled with mazes of razor sharp volcanic glass, and a weird atmospheric effect that rendered our sensors useless. There whole place that this dark gray mist that prevented light from penetrating more than a dozen feet." He shook his head at a fountain between two elegant benches. It was like the entire Citadel was allergic to straight lines. Most advanced technology and culture in the galaxy, and they couldn't lay out a city in a way that made sense? "I'm kind of feeling nostalgic for the place right now."

Williams pointed. "There is an Avina kiosk right over there."

"That might be the place." Alenko nodded to where an asari receptionist stood in front of a building.

#

"Alenko..."

"Sorry, Commander." Alenko actually blushed.

Williams was snickering. "Do I want to know why the Consort knows of you?"

"I'm kind of curious why the Consort knows of me." Michael glanced back at Alenko. "Add 'Oraka' to the list of turians we are trying to track down."

"You know, there is an Avina kiosk right there." Williams pointed.

#

"This garden looks familiar." Alenko looked around. "Isn't that the transport stop where we arrived?"

"You know, there is an Avina kiosk right there." Williams pointed. "And one over there." She pointed in another direction. She sighed dramatically. "Just imagine how much further humanity could have explored by now if men would stop and ask for directions."

Michael glared over his shoulder, then shook his head. He turned to Alenko. "You realize now we can't ask for directions."

Alenko nodded. "Because she made it a thing."

#

"Alright, the hanar's shop is..." Michael tilted his head. "Right over there, on the other side of the river."

"How are we supposed to get there from here?" Alenko raised an eyebrow.

"Hey, look, another Avina kiosk." Williams had a smug look on her face as she pointedly didn't look at either of them.

"I don't need to ask for directions." Michael started walking. He made it about five steps. "Chief."

"Yes, sir?" Williams raised an eyebrow.

"I order you to go over to that kiosk and ask for directions."

"Yes, sir."

#

"I'm not sure how helpful a krogan mercenary is going to be." Michael shrugged. "Though the fact that Fist is working for Saren could be useful."

"We can still go find Harkin." Williams pointed to a nearby transport kiosk.

"Right." Michael gestured. "Go get directions to Chora's Den." Sounds like they were eventually going to end up there anyway.

"Yes, sir." Williams gave a salute that failed to meet proper military standards before walking over to the Avina.

"Alenko, remind me to download citadel maps to my omnitool when she's not looking."

"Yes, sir." Alenko's lips twitched just slightly.

#

A shot impacted the wall just a couple inches from where Michael's head had been a moment before as he pulled Alenko down and out of the line of fire. Williams ducked back behind the wall. "This must be the place," she said as she drew her rifle.

Michael drew his own sidearm. "Well, we got someone's attention."

#

And now he was taking his subordinates to a club filled with half naked women. Hadn't Anderson chewed him out for something similar a couple years back? A serving girl was happy to point Harkin out, muttering something about hoping they were there to shoot him.

From the way the man's eyes locked onto Williams' chest, it wasn't a far-off notion. "Alliance military. Hmph. I coulda been a marine you know. Instead I joined the goddamned Citadel Security. Biggest mistake of my life."

"I'm looking for a C-Sec officer." Michael looked down at the drunken mess sitting casually at the table. "A turian named Garrus." Maybe the krogan would have been a better idea.

"Garrus?" Harkin snorted a laugh. "You must be one of Captain

Anderson's crew. Poor bastard's still trying to bring Saren down, eh?" He leaned back in his chair. "I know where Garrus is. But you gotta tell me something first. Did the captain let you in on his big secret?"

"Just tell me where Garrus is before this gets ugly." Michael shifted just slightly to block Harkin's view of Williams.

Harkin glared at him. "But it's all related. Don't you see?" He smirked. "The captain used to be a Spectre. Didn't know that, did you? It was all very hush-hush. The first human ever given that honor. And then he blew it. Screwed up his mission so bad they kicked him out. Of course, he blames Saren. Says the turian set him up."

Michael leaned forward, and patted Harkin's shoulder before catching the front of his tunic and pulling him up straight. He kept his face pleasant. "Why should I believe a drunk like you?"

Harkin looked down at Michael's hand, then there was a small glimmer of recognition. He swallowed. "Fine. Ask Anderson. I bet he tells you. He's too stupid and proud to lie right to your face."

He let Harkin go, smoothing the front of his tunic before stepping back. "Just tell me where Garrus went."

"Garrus was sniffing around Dr. Michel's office. She runs the med clinic on the other side of the wards. Last I heard, he was going back there."

"I'm out of here."

#

He was about to leave the bar when Alenko gestured to a turian sitting at table on the other side. "That's General Oraka, sir."

Michael sighed. "Well, this should be fun."

#

"Why didn't Captain Anderson tell us he used to be a Spectre?" Williams asked.

Alenko shook his head. "Maybe it's not true. Harkin's an ass. I bet he's just messing with our heads."

"Williams, I order you to get directions to Dr. Michel's office." Michael glanced down at the datacard in his hand before tucking it into a pocket. "And the elcor embassy." He started walking towards the transport kiosk. A couple teenagers with ruffian written all over them were goofing off nearby. He 'accidentally' dropped Harkin's credit chit as he passed them.

On their way to the clinic, they were stopped twice. The first was by some strange blond man who actually asked him for an autograph. He complied mostly due to surprise at being asked. The second was a reporter who had heard about their investigation and wanted him to pass on any interesting information he learned. Corruption on the

Citadel. That should just thrill the Council. He agreed readily.

#

They walked into the medical clinic to find Garrus crouched behind a low wall and several thugs holding weapons on a panicking doctor. "I didn't tell anyone. I swear."

"That was smart, Doc." The lead thug smiled threateningly. On the other side of the wall, Garrus was moving into a shooting position. "Now, if Garrus comes around, you stay smart. Keep your mouth shut, or we'll -" The door behind Michael slid shut with an audible click, drawing the attention of the thugs. Shit. The thug immediately grabbed the doctor and used her as a shield. "Who are you?"

Michael pulled out his pistol and gestured for his companions to start spreading out. "Let her go."

Alenko flared his biotics, and the thug turned towards him. Garrus immediately moved out of cover and put a slug in the lead thug's head. Michael put his own slug through the head of the thug that had been standing next to him. Once clear, the doctor wasted no time in diving behind a desk. He moved in to provide Garrus with some cover fire.

The remaining thugs dove behind a low wall and a file cabinet. Alenko gestured at Williams before simply using his biotics to lift the file cabinet out of the way. Williams chuckled as she shot the man behind it. The two thugs behind the wall both popped up, and Garrus and Michael put slugs in them before they could get shots off.

"Perfect timing, Shepard." Garrus nodded to him. "Gave me a clear shot at that bastard."

"You took him down clean." He returned the nod before briefly checking to see if any of the thugs were still breathing. None appeared to be.

"Sometimes you get lucky." Garrus offered the doctor a hand up. She was shaking slightly. "Dr. Michel? Are you hurt?"

"No." She wiped her hands on her tunic. "I'm okay. Thanks to you. All of you."

"Why were they threatening you?" Michael collected the weapons, handing them off to Williams. "Who do they work for?"

"They work for Fist." Dr. Michel looked from Michael to Garrus as if not certain which of them she should be talking to. "They wanted to shut me up, keep me from telling Garrus about the quarian."

A quarian? "What quarian?"

She wrung her hands and paced nervously. "A few days ago, a quarian came by my office. She'd been shot, but she wouldn't tell me who did it. I could tell she was scared, probably on the run. She asked me about the Shadow Broker. She wanted to trade information in exchange for a safe place to hide."

"Where is she now?" Information was something they could use.

"I put her in contact with Fist. He's an agent for the Shadow Broker."

Well. Shit. That complicated things. Garrus shook his head. "Not any more. Now he works for Saren, and the Shadow Broker isn't too happy about it."

The doctor's eyes widened. "Fist betrayed the Shadow Broker? That's stupid, even for him. Saren must have made him quite the offer."

"That quarian must have something Saren wants." Garrus turned towards Michael. "Something worth crossing the Shadow Broker to get."

"She must have something that proves he's a traitor." Michael frowned and raised an eyebrow at Dr. Michel. "Did the quarian mention anything about Saren? Or the geth?"

"She did." Dr. Michel nodded. "The information she was going to trade. She said it had something to do with the geth."

"She must be able to link Saren to the geth." Garrus gestured. "There's no way the Council can ignore this."

Back to Chora's Den. "Time we paid Fist a visit."

"This is your show, Shepard." Garrus took a small step forward. "But I want to bring Saren down as much as you do. I'm coming with you."

And now he was working with the cops. Though more firepower never hurt. "Welcome aboard, Garrus."

"You know, we aren't the only ones going after Fist. The Shadow Broker hired a krogan county hunter named Wrex to take him out."

Turians. Quarrians. "A krogan might come in handy." Maybe they'd pick up an asari while they were at it.

"Last I heard, he was at C-Sec academy." Garrus nodded.

"What's he doing there?" Alenko asked.

"Fist accused him of making threats. We brought Wrex in for a little talk. If you hurry, you can catch him at the academy before he leaves."

"Move out." Michael headed for the door.

#

Wrex appeared to be completely unconcerned about the fact he was surrounded by heavily armed C-Sec officers. Michael liked him already. "Witnesses saw you making threats in Fist's bar. Stay away from him."

"I don't take orders from you." Wrex towered over the human

officer.

"This is your only warning, Wrex." The officer glared.

"You should warn Fist. I will kill him." Wrex returned the glare, and leaned forward in a way that made it clear he was fully capable of literally biting the officer's head off.

"You want me to arrest you?" The officer gestured.

The krogan actually chuckled. "I want you to try." He waited a beat, and none of the officers moved. He shrugged, and started walking.

"Go on. Get out of here." The officer spoke to the krogan's back.

He saw Michael watching, and stopped. "Do I know you, human?"

"I'm going after Fist." Michael shrugged. "I don't want you getting in my way."

"Now I recognize you. Commander Shepard, from the Alliance." Wrex looked him over. "I've heard a lot about you." He walked closer. He was slightly larger than the last couple krogan Michael had encountered, and had a fairly impressive scar collection. "We're both warriors, Shepard. Out of respect, I'll give you fair warning. I'm going to kill Fist."

Garrus spoke up. "Fist knows you're coming. We'll have a better chance if we all work together."

"My people have a saying: Seek the enemy of your enemy, and you will find a friend." The edges of Wrex's mouth curled upward.

Michael held out a hand. "I think we're going to get along just fine, Wrex."

Wrex accepted the handshake. "Let's go. I hate to keep Fist waiting."

#

Someone must have tipped Fist off. The only people in the bar were heavily armed mercenaries, all of which were shooting at them. Definitely his kind of place.

They cleared the bar in under a minute. Michael gestured for Garrus and Williams to hold position. Alenko and Wrex followed him through the door.

Where two unarmored men stood, pointing crappy pistols at him. "Stop right there. Don't come any closer."

"Warehouse workers." Alenko shook his head. "All the real guards must be dead."

"Stay back or we'll shoot." The pistol shook a little in the man's hand.

Michael sighed. "I just killed fifty bodyguards to get in here. What

do you think I'll do to you?"

"Uh..." The two men looked at each other. "Well..." They lowered the pistols. "Uh..."

The shorter of the two shrugged. "Aw, screw Fist. He doesn't pay us enough for this." Both men walked out. Williams and Garrus let them pass, with slightly amused looks on their faces.

"It would've been quicker to just kill them." Wrex shrugged and started walking towards the next door.

#

For a man with a supposedly scary reputation, Fist went down rather quickly. Michael only had to put two slugs in him. "Wait. Don't kill me. I surrender."

"Tell me where the quarian is and I won't have to shoot you in the kneecaps."

Fist flinched. "She's not here. I don't know where she is. That's the truth."

"He's no use to you now." Wrex cocked his shotgun. "Let me kill him."

"Wait. Wait." Fist held up his hands. "I don't know where the quarian is, but I know where you can find her." He looked up at Michael. "The quarian isn't here. Said she'd only deal with the Shadow Broker himself."

"Face to face?" Wrex shook his head. "Impossible. Even I was hired through an agent."

"Nobody meets the Shadow Broker." Fist stood up, a little shaky. "Ever. Even I don't know his true identity. But she didn't know that. I told her I'd set a meeting up. But when she shows up, it'll be Saren's men waiting for her."

Michael stepped forward and tucked his pistol under Fist's chin. "Tell me where that meeting is before I blow your lying head off."

"Here on the wards." Fist swallowed nervously. "The back alley by the markets. She's supposed to meet them right now. You can make it if you hurry."

He stepped back, and Wrex promptly shot the guy. Michael gave him an annoyed look.

"Oh my god." Alenko stepped back in surprise.

"The Shadow Broker paid me to kill him. I don't leave jobs half done."

Good to know. Michael bent and scooped up the OSDs scattered on Fist's table. "A lot of people died because of him. He had it coming." He straightened up and started back towards the door. He could hear fire. "Now let's move. We have to save that

quarian."

#

Williams and Garrus had mostly taken care of the backup problem by the time they left Fist's office. The turian was proving that the thug at the doctor's office hadn't been a lucky shot. Michael put a slug between the last thug's eyes before heading out the door. "Come on."

#

The quarian had clearly already figured out that she was being set up by the time they'd arrived. She took immediate advantage of the distraction they provided to hurl a flashbang at a few of the thugs and dive for cover. With that bit of chaos, taking out the mercs was easy.

She stood up from behind the crates as soon as the fire ceased. "Fist set me up. I knew I couldn't trust him."

"And he got dead for it." Michael nodded to her. "You've got proof Saren is working with the geth. I need it."

"Not so fast." She raised a hand. "Who are you?"

"We're the folks who killed Fist and rescued you. And we are running out of time. I need the evidence you have against Saren."

"I guess I owe you." She adjusted the hood on her envirosuit. "But not out here in the open. We need to go somewhere safe."

Alenko stepped forward. "The ambassador's office. It's safe there. He'll want to see this anyway."

#

Udina started the lecture before he was all the way in the door. "You're not making my life easy, Shepard. Firefights in the wards? An all-out assault on Chora's den? Do you know how many -" He turned around, and then took a step backward when he realized Shepard wasn't alone. "Who's this? A quarian? What are you up to, Shepard?"

"This quarian can help us bring down Saren." Michael shrugged. "I would've told you that if you hadn't jumped down my throat."

"I apologize, Commander." Udina actually looked like he meant it. Maybe he wouldn't steal the man's chair. "This whole thing with Saren has me a bit on edge." He nodded to the quarian. "Maybe we should just start at the beginning, Miss...?"

"My name is Tali. Tali'Zorah nar Rayya."

"We don't see many quarians here. Why did you leave the flotilla?" Udina actually sounded personable when he was playing the diplomat. Perhaps they had given him the job for a reason other than to get him off Earth.

Tali paced a few steps. "I was on my Pilgrimage, my rite of passage into adulthood."

They really didn't have time. "What kind of evidence did you find? How did you get it?"

"During my travels I began hearing reports of the geth. Since they drove my people into exile, the geth have never ventured beyond the Veil. I was curious." She stopped pacing. "I tracked a patrol of geth to an uncharted world. I waited for one to become separated from its unit. Then I disabled it and removed its memory core." The kid had guts.

Captain Anderson raised an eyebrow. "I thought the geth fried their memory cores when they died. Some kind of defense mechanism."

"What did you find out?" Michael gestured for Tali to keep talking.

She began pulling up something on her omnitool. "Most of the core was wiped clean. But I salvaged something from its audio banks."

A recording came out of the omnitool. "Eden Prime was a major victory. The beacon has brought us one step closer to finding the Conduit."

Anderson actually smiled. "That's Saren's voice. This proves he was involved in the attack."

"Saren won't get out of this one." Michael gestured sharply.

"Wait..." Tali touched a couple more buttons. "There's more. Saren wasn't working alone."

The recording replayed, and this time a feminine voice answered Saren's. "And one step closer to the return of the Reapers."

"I don't recognize that other voice." Udina frowned. "The one talking about the Reapers."

Why would he? The galaxy had trillions of life forms. Something about the Reapers tickled his memory. Where had he heard that? "I feel like I've heard that name before..."

"According to the memory core, the Reapers were a hyper-advanced machine race that existed 50,000 years ago." Tali spread her hands. "The Reapers hunted the Protheans to total extinction, and then they vanished. At least, that's what the geth believe."

"Sounds a little far-fetched." Udina folded his arms.

One of the images from the beacon tried to crawl across his mind. He shoved it away. "The vision on Eden Prime -" It kept trying to come back. "I understand it now. I saw the Protheans being wiped out by the Reapers."

"The geth revere the Reapers as gods, the pinnacle of non-organic life. And they believe Saren knows how to bring the Reapers back." Tali looked from him to Udina and back again.

"The Council is just going to love this." Udina shook his

head.

"They won't believe you anyway." With the evidence, he'd be cleared for going after Saren. "Just keep them out of this."

"We have to tell them." Anderson stepped forward. "Even if they don't believe anything else, this proves Saren is a traitor."

"The captain's right." Udina waved a hand. "We need to present this to the Council right away."

Wrex's deep voice came from behind him. "What about her? The quarian?"

"My name is Tali." She turned to face Michael. He couldn't see her face behind the mask, but he was pretty sure if he could, her eyes would be wide and excited. "You saw me in the alley, Commander. You know what I can do. Let me come with you."

Having a geth expert along could be useful. "I'll take all the help I can get."

She actually bounced a little before moving back to join Alenko and the others. "Thanks. You won't regret this."

Anderson and I will go ahead and get things ready with the Council. Take a few minutes to collect yourself, then meet us in the Tower."

#

The husband of one of Williams' former squadmates met them as they were leaving the embassy. A few minutes later, Michael found himself dealing with a clerk who was refusing to relinquish the body of the squadmate. "Look, I'm going to be blunt here." Michael put a hand on the clerk's shoulder. "You won't be the first person I've kneecapped..."

Wrex smirked. "You won't even be the first person he's kneecapped since having lunch."

"Commander, I -" The clerk swallowed nervously. "I don't think threats are necessary. Even if the body were here on the Citadel, would you really risk going in shooting to get it?"

"Didn't you say you were briefed on his activities?" Williams raised an eyebrow.

The clerk looked from Williams to Wrex to Michael. "All right, Commander. You win. It was hard enough refusing Mr. Bhatia. I'm not going to risk an incident by refusing you."

#

"Come on." Anderson was waiting at the base of the stairs. "Udina's presenting the quarian's evidence to the Council."

Michael followed him to the dais. Udina appeared to be fully in his element, complete with theatrics. "You wanted proof. There it is."

It was hard to read the turian councilor's expression, but Michael was fairly confident the man was not enjoying the taste of crow. "This evidence is irrefutable, Ambassador. Saren will be stripped of his Spectre status and all efforts will be made to bring him in to answer for his crimes."

"I recognize the other voice, the one speaking with Saren." The asari councilor clasped her hands behind her back. "Matriarch Benezia."

"She must be working with the geth, too." Michael didn't recognize the name.

"Matriarch Benezia is a powerful biotic, and she had many followers. She will make a formidable ally for Saren." The asari councilor nodded.

"I'm more interested in the Reapers." The salarian councilor tapped his... or her... dammit, he should have looked it up... fingers on its chin. "What do you know about them?"

Anderson stepped forward. "Only what was extracted from the geth's memory core. The Reapers were an ancient race of machines that wiped out the Protheans. Then they vanished."

The image tried to crawl across his mind again. "The geth believe the Reapers are gods. And Saren is the prophet for their return." He was having some trouble believing synthetics even had a concept for a god.

"We think the Conduit is the key to bringing them back. Saren's searching for it. That's why he attacked Eden Prime." Anderson nodded.

"Do we even know what this Conduit is?" The salarian councilor asked.

Michael wasn't sure it mattered. "Saren thinks it can bring back Reapers. That's bad enough."

"Listen to what you're saying." The turian councilor shook his head. "Saren wants to bring back the machines that wiped out all life in the galaxy? Impossible. It has to be. Where did the Reapers go? Why did they vanish? How come we've found no trace of their existence? If they were real, we'd have found something."

Two hundred years ago, most of humanity would have said similar about aliens. "I tried to warn you about Saren, and you refused to face the truth. Don't make the same mistake again."

"This is different." Once again, the asari councilor stepped in to play peacemaker. "You proved Saren betrayed the Council. We all agree he's using the geth to search for the Conduit, but we don't really know why."

"The Reapers are obviously just a myth, Commander." The salarian councilor waved a hand dismissively. "A convenient lie to cover Saren's true purpose. A legend he is using to bend the geth to his will."

The images that had seared into his mind were far too real to dismiss so casually. "Fifty thousand years ago, the Reapers wiped out all galactic civilization. If Saren finds the Conduit, it will happen again."

"Saren is a rogue agent on the run for his life." The turian councilor leaned on his podium. "He no longer has the rights or resources of a Spectre. The Council has stripped him of his position."

"That is not good enough." Udina pointed a hand at the council. "You know he's hiding somewhere in the Traverse. Send your fleet in."

The salarian councilor shook its head. "A fleet cannot track down one man."

"A Citadel fleet could secure the entire region." Udina gestured sharply. "Keep the geth from attacking any more of our colonies."

"Or it could trigger a war with the Terminus Systems." The turian councilor's mandibles clicked. "We won't be dragged into a galactic confrontation over a few dozen human colonies."

As if it hadn't been their Spectre that had set all this in motion. Michael stepped forward. "Every time humanity asks for help you ignore us."

"Shepard's right." Udina nodded to him. "I'm sick of this Council and its anti-human bull -"

"Ambassador." The asari councilor held up a hand. "There is another solution. A way to stop Saren that does not require fleets or armies." She glanced over at the turian councilor.

The turian councilor immediately started protesting. "No. It's too soon. Humanity is not ready for the responsibilities that come with joining the Spectres."

"It was a turian Spectre who betrayed this council." Michael glared at him. "And it was a human who exposed him." If this is what it took to get Saren, so be it. "I've earned this."

Both the salarian and the asari turned to stare at the turian councilor. Though he was clearly reluctant, the turian councilor nodded.

"Commander Shepard." The asari straightened. "Step forward."

Michael glanced at Anderson, who nodded. He stepped forward. Udina was actually smiling. He looked around to see that others in the vicinity had stopped what they were doing to come observe. For the first time in his life, he gave serious consideration to running for it.

"It is the decision of the Council that you be granted all the powers and privileges of the Special Tactics and Reconnaissance branch of the Citadel."

"Spectres are not trained, but chosen. Individuals forged in the fire of service and battle; those whose actions elevate them above the rank and file."

"Spectres are an ideal, a symbol. The embodiment of courage, determination, and self-reliance. They are the right hand of the Council, instruments of our will."

"Spectres bear a great burden. They are protectors of galactic peace, both our first and last line of defense. The safety of the galaxy is theirs to uphold."

"You are the first human Spectre, Commander. This is a great accomplishment for you and your entire species."

Well.

Shit.

6. Chapter 6

The salarian councilor stared down at him. "We're sending you into the Traverse after Saren. He's a fugitive from justice, so you are authorized to use any means necessary to apprehend or eliminate him."

That part was good, at least. "I'll find him."

"This meeting of the Council is adjourned."

Anderson held out a hand. Michael took it. He was starting to feel like one of the times he'd been shot in the head. "Congratulations, Commander."

"We've got a lot of work to do, Shepard." Udina was having trouble not smiling. "You're going to need a ship, a crew, supplies..."

"You'll get access to special equipment and training now. You should go down to the C-Sec Academy and speak to the Spectre requisitions officer."

Udina gestured. "Anderson, come with me. I'll need your help to set all this up." He walked off. Anderson nodded at Michael again before following.

Williams shook her head as she watched him go. "Not even a thank you from the ambassador."

"What do you expect from a politician?" He gestured. "Come on."

"Right behind you, Commander."

#

He stopped when he saw Garrus and Tali standing at the base of the steps. Wrex wasn't far. He walked over to them. "You still want..."

"Yes." Garrus didn't let him finish asking.

Tali bounced a little. "I want to help."

"I'm in." Wrex said from where he was standing.

Michael raised an eyebrow. "You are?"

"Tired of the Citadel." Wrex shrugged. "Too much white."

A cop, a krogan, and a quarian. With luck, he'd be able to convince Anderson to let him hang on to Alenko and Williams as well. They worked well together. And they were starting to grow on him a bit.

He felt his stomach twist. Shit. Did this Spectre thing mean he was a cop now? The universe was laughing its ass off.

#

Wrex and Garrus went to take care of their own preparations, while Michael dealt with his unfinished business on the Citadel. The reporter was absolutely ecstatic about the OSDs. The elcor was something about the datapad the general had provided. And the Consort was... really awkward and never to be spoken of again.

Tali didn't have anything other than what she was actually carrying on her. It occurred to him he'd have to make sure whatever ship he ended up with was stocked with rations for Tali and Garrus.

He took Anderson's advice about checking out Spectre requisitions, and put a dent in his bank account purchasing a new sniper rifle. After a bit of thought, he upgraded his omnitool as well.

#

Udina and Anderson were waiting for them at the docking bay. And there was definitely some tension. Michael headed towards them, hoping whatever was going on wasn't going to bite him in the ass. Udina nodded when he approached. "I've got big news for you, Shepard. Captain Anderson is stepping down as commanding officer of the Normandy. The ship is yours now."

That was... What? Anderson folded his arms, and nodded to Shepard. "She's quick and quiet and you know the crew. Perfect ship for a Spectre. Treat her well, Commander."

"This isn't right." Michael shook his head. "The Normandy belongs to you."

"You needed your own ship. A Spectre can't answer to anyone but the Council. And its time for me to step down."

Next time he was in Udina's office, he was going to steal all the screws from the desk. They could discuss it without Udina as an audience. "Any leads?" They quickly filled him in. Noveria, Feros, and Matriarch Benezia had a daughter somewhere in the Artemis Tau cluster. A daughter that specialized in protheans. "Artemis Tau sounds like the place to start."

"It's your decision, Commander. You're a Spectre now. You don't answer to us." Anderson nodded.

"But your actions still reflect on humanity as a whole. You make a mess and I get stuck cleaning it up." Udina glared.

It likely would have been best if Udina hadn't reminded him that in addition to a stealth warship and unlimited judicial authority, he now had a personal public relations cleanup crew. From Anderson's wince, he agreed. Michael shrugged. "I'll take care of Saren. You take care of the political fallout."

"Not exactly the answer I was looking for, Shepard." Udina shook his head. "Remember: you were a human long before you were a Spectre. I have a meeting to get to. Captain Anderson can answer any questions you might have." He stalked off.

Michael shook his head before turning towards Anderson. "Come clean with me, Captain."

Anderson sighed. "I was in your shoes twenty years ago, Shepard. They were considering me for the Spectres."

"Why didn't you ever mention this?"

"What was I supposed to say? 'I could've been a Spectre but I blew it?' I failed, Commander. It's not something I'm proud of." He waved a hand. "Ask me again later and maybe I'll tell you the whole story. For now, all you need to know is I was sent on a mission with Saren, and he made sure the Council rejected me. I had my shot. It came and went. Now you have a chance to make up for my mistakes."

"Captain, I don't have a great track record of making up for my own mistakes." Michael looked over at the Normandy. "Saren's not going to get away this time."

"I know. You're an asshole, Shepard. But you've never failed a mission." Anderson nodded to him.

Michael shrugged in acknowledgment of the words. "This isn't right. I feel like I'm stealing the ship from you, sir."

Anderson shook his head and chuckled. "It's not like it's the first ship you've stolen." He shook his head. "It's not even like it's the first ship you've stolen from me."

"Not sure the drop shuttle counts, sir." Michael shook his head. "I gave it back." When Anderson raised an eyebrow, he amended the statement. "Most of it."

#

Michael told the aliens where they could settle in, then headed up to the cockpit. Garrus had to pull Tali along when the quarian kept stopping to look at various displays. A lot of the crew turned to stare as they passed.

"I heard what happened to Captain Anderson. Survives a hundred battles, and then gets taken down by backroom politics." Joker

glanced over his shoulder. "Just watch your back, Commander. Things go bad on this mission, you're next on their chopping block."

"That's what I like about you Joker." Michael folded his arms. "Your constant optimism and cheer." He shook his head. "Captain Anderson should be here."

"Yeah, the captain got screwed. But it's not like you could've stopped it. Nobody's blaming you." Joker looked up at him. "Everyone on this ship is behind you, Commander. One hundred percent." He pointed. "Intercom's open. If you've got anything you want to say to the crew, now's the time."

He stared at the intercom then leaned forward. "Crew, this is Commander Shepard. We have our orders: find Saren before he finds the Conduit. The galaxy is watching. Let's show them who we are." He straightened back up.

"Well said, Commander. Captain would be proud."

"Fancy speeches won't stop Saren from finding the Conduit." Michael gestured. "If we really want to make the captain proud we better get this bird in the air." He turned to leave the cockpit.

"Yes, sir."

#

He checked on Williams, and learned she'd taken him up on his offer regarding Spectre requisitions. She was all but cooing as she fitted the modifications to her new shotgun. Michael shook his head, and went over to speak to Garrus.

"Thanks for bringing me on board, Commander." Garrus straightened up from where he'd been examining the mako. "I knew working with a Spectre would be better than life at C-Sec."

"Have you worked with a Spectre before?"

"Well, no." Garrus's mandibles clicked slightly. "But I know what they're like. Spectres make their own rules. You're free to handle things your way." He gestured. "At C-Sec, you're buried by rules. The damn bureaucrats are always on your back."

"Being a Spectre does have its advantages." He needed to find out just what kind of reports he was going to be expected to file.

"Exactly my point." Garrus threw up one of his hands. "If I'm trying to take down a suspect, it shouldn't matter how I do it, as long as I do it. But C-Sec wants it done their way. Protocol and procedure come first. That's why I left."

Considering how often he'd been able to game the system, the guy probably had a point. And for that matter, how many cops had wasted their time with his piddling bullshit rather than going after serious criminals just because it was easier? "You quit because you don't like the way they do things?"

"There's more to it than that." Garrus started unpacking some of his gear, checking over his armor as he stowed it into one of the lockers. "It didn't start out bad, but as I rose in ranks, I got saddled with more and more red tape. C-Sec's handling of Saren was typical. I just couldn't take it anymore. I hate leaving..." He unpacked a sniper rifle.

Michael moved in to get a better look, and Garrus offered it to him. The scope was oriented differently than what he was used too. "You did the right thing. Life's too short to sit around waiting for things to happen." He peered through the scope, and realized it must be designed to work with the visor Garrus wore over his left eye. It would be interesting to see how it functioned in the field. He'd always found the eyepieces more trouble than they were worth. He offered the rifle back.

"Yeah. You're probably right." Garrus packed the rifle away carefully. "Either way, I plan to make the most of this. And without C-Sec headquarters looking over my shoulder, well, maybe I can get the job done my way for a change."

"As long as you do your job well, you're free to go about your business as you see fit."

"Thank you, Commander."

#

Wrex was... well, he hadn't pulverized anyone yet, so it seemed he was getting along alright. He seemed inclined to keep more to himself. After a couple minutes of searching, he found Tali in engineering. Adams was all but doting on her. She waved when she saw him enter. "Your ship's amazing, Shepard. I've never seen a drive core like this before. I can't believe you were able to fit it into a ship this small." She waved towards the engine. "I'm starting to understand why humans have been so successful. I had no idea Alliance vessels were so advanced."

"The Normandy's a prototype. Cutting edge technology." He nodded.

She ran a hand along one of the consoles as though it were a work of art. "A month ago, I was patching a makeshift fuel line into a converted tug ship in the flotilla. Now I'm sitting on board one of the most advanced vessels in Citadel space." She made a sound somewhere between a purr and a sigh. "I have to thank you again for bringing me along. Traveling on a vessel like this is a dream come true for me."

Her enthusiasm was almost infectious. "I had no idea you found ship technology so interesting."

"It comes with being a quarian." She examined one of the readouts. "The Migrant Fleet is the key to the survival of my people. Ships are our most valuable resource." He listened as she went on about her people for a while. It took some time before he got around to his reason for locating her, and asked her about the geth. Unfortunately, she didn't have a lot more information to offer than what was available on the extranet. Recovering the memory core seemed it had a lot more to do with her knack at engineering rather than special

quarian knowledge.

It did sound as though she could make herself useful as part of his crew. And after listening to gush some more about about her pilgrimage and what coming along meant to her... If he made her leave now, his entire engineering department would mutiny.

#

Kaidan hesitated a moment when he saw the commander walk by.
"Commander, do you have a minute?"

Shepard shifted trajectory to walk over. "I always make time for my officers."

He took a deep breath. "Off the record, I think there's something wrong here. This Saren is looking for records on some kind of galactic extinction. But we can't get backup from the Council?" He shook his head. And they'd sidelined Anderson. Shepard had proved to have skills, but he didn't have the same clout Anderson did. "Sorry, Commander. There's writing on the wall, here, but someone isn't reading it."

"The Council doesn't want to believe anything's wrong. I'd call it human nature, but..." Shepard shrugged, then leaned on the wall across from him.

"I hear ya. I -" Kaidan folded his arms and leaned on the railing across from Shepard. "It just seems like a group that's been around as long as the Council should see this coming." He chuckled. "It's funny. We finally get out here, and the final frontier was already settled. And the residents don't even seem impressed by the view. Or the dangers."

"Well, well, you're a romantic." Shepard shook his head. "Did you sign on for 'the dream,' Alenko? Secure man's future in space?"

A small laugh escaped him. "Yeah, I read a lot of those books when I was a kid. Where the hero goes out to space to prove himself worthy of the woman he loves. Or, you know. For justice." He shrugged. "Maybe I was a romantic in the beginning. But I thought about it after Brain Camp -" He caught a moment of confusion on Shepard's face. "Ah, sorry, 'Biotic Acclimation and Temperance training.' I'm not looking for 'the dream'. I just want to do some good. See what's out here." He rubbed the back of his neck, belatedly remembering he was talking to his commanding officer. "Sorry if I got too informal. Protocol wasn't a big focus back in BAaT."

"Tell me about it." Shepard gestured for Kaidan to follow him into what was now his office. He'd only seen Anderson behind the desk once, but it felt a little weird seeing Shepard there. It didn't take him long to start to relax, and he found himself telling Shepard about Jump Zero. Shepard encouraged him to speak freely. "There were other kids in the same boat, right? At least you weren't alone out there."

"That's true." Kaidan shrugged. "We did have a little circle that'd get together every night before lights-out. We didn't have much to do, though. It was a research platform then, and Conatix kept Jump Zero off the extranet. To prevent leaks."

"Must have had plenty of time to get to know each other."

"Yeah. We'd sit around and bull every night after dinner. Play cards or network games." He smiled fondly at a couple of the memories. "There was this girl named Rahna who had a little circle grow up around her. She was from Turkey. Her family was very rich. But she was smart, and charming as hell. Beautiful, but not stuck up about it."

"The one that got away?" Shepard raised an eyebrow.

"I suppose you could say that." Kaidan ducked his head. "Things never fell together. Training. You know."

"Sheila." Shepard spun an old fashioned Earth coin on the desk. "We robbed this little boutique, and tripped the alarm." He sighed at the memory. "She took off in the car we'd stolen for the getaway vehicle, left me holding the bag."

Kaidan blinked, and sat up straighter. "Are you..." Robbing a store and stealing a getaway car? He tilted his head. "Serious?"

"Did two months in St. Nicolas Juvenile Rehabilitation Center. I was fifteen."

"Were you successfully rehabilitated?" Kaidan raised an eyebrow.

"I learned a better method of hacking security systems. Almost the same thing." Shepard shook his head.

"So she was..." Kaidan's lips twitched slightly. "Literally the one that got away."

"Alenko." Shepard narrowed his eyes, but the corner of his mouth lifted just a little. "Pun on my ship, and I'll toss you out the airlock."

"Sorry, Commander." Kaidan composed his face again. The commander had a reputation, but he'd never heard anything about the guy doing time. He hesitated. "You make a habit of getting this personal with everyone?"

Shepard actually looked surprised by the question, and it took him a moment to answer. "No." He leaned back. "No, I don't." The communication unit on the desk beeped, and he glanced at it. "We'll talk again later."

"I'll uh -" Kaidan stood. "I'll need some time to process that, Commander." He nodded. "But I'd like that."

#

Michael stared at the communication unit for several seconds before answering. "Just heard the news. Congratulations."

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "Admiral Hackett. If I find out you had anything to do with this..."

"You'll get your ass kicked again?" There was a trace of amusement in

Hackett's voice.

"Not sure me running around the galaxy with a stealth warship and a free rein is the best idea, sir."

"You're on an alliance warship, Michael. Wearing an alliance uniform. Representing humanity. Our skills. Our drive." Hackett sighed. "Our unwillingness to get pushed around. Our tendency to cause a great deal of trouble for those who piss us off. Our inability to shut up. Our..."

"Getting the point. You know, I was just thinking 'the galaxy at stake isn't quite enough pressure.'"

"You've got a big job to do, son. Get to work."

7. Chapter 7

"I'm picking up an anomaly, Commander." Joker glanced back at him. "Could be Prothean ruins."

"Take us in closer." He tapped his communicator. "Vakarian, Alenko, suit up and meet me at the mako."

#

"Devlon is .53% more accurate past seventy meters."

"I'm not denying it's a good scanner, but I prefer something that doesn't need to be nursed back to health every time the temperature changes three degrees." Michael shook his head. "I got run over by a mako on an ice planet and the Ariake didn't lose a nanometer of accuracy."

"If you just want to go ahead and pull over, I think I can walk from here."

"Your suit is only rated for ten minutes in these conditions, LT." Michael maneuvered the mako between an icy outcropping and a rather steep drop. "What we really need is the Helix model."

"Good luck." Garrus's mandibles clicked. "I talked to your requisitions officer, and he can't even afford the license. Though if we combine the Devlon with the Volkov barrel..."

"That would be ten minutes of not talking about sniper rifles, right?"

"Then you have to re-seat the scope every time it overheats instead of just waiting for it to cool off. Our enemies usually come at us more than one or two at a time." Michael shrugged. "Though vorchas have a hilarious tendency to line up. Have you tried using the Kassa rail extension with the Elkoss scram rail?"

"Just once. My shot went through the target, and the wall, and the power junction behind it. Knocked out the power to three shops."

"I bet with my barriers I could extend it out to a good fifteen."

"Yeah, it's no good for cities, but out here? I once took down a Hammerhead."

"Did you get a chance to look at the HMWSR line?"

"Really, I could scout ahead, and then you could pick me up when you get the mako across."

"I did, but frankly I'd have to knock over another bank to afford one and I'm pretty sure that falls on the 'don't' list."

"I'd love to combine one of those with the Devlon."

"Your Devlon obsession is a little disturbing."

"How do I turn off the radio in this suit?"

"Properly calibrated, the Devlon mark 10 can hit over 99.93% accuracy at range under low visibility conditions."

"As long as it's not too hot or cold out."

"Wait, what did you mean another bank?"

"I've got something on the scanner, commander." Alenko tapped the display. "Looks like..." He frowned. "A smuggler base."

"Let's go see if they've got anything fun." Michael steered the mako towards the location.

#

"Commander. You have a minute to talk?"

He nodded to Williams. "I keep an open-door policy. If you have any concerns, lay them on me."

"All right." She hesitated only a moment. "I know things are different aboard the Normandy, but- I'm concerned about the aliens. Vakarian and Wrex. With all due respect, Commander, should they have full access to the ship?"

Michael wondered briefly why she hadn't included Tali. Maybe she was right not to trust Vakarian. Anyone who preferred proton rounds to polonium needed their head surgically removed from their ass. "You don't trust their motives because they're not human."

"This is the most advanced ship in the Alliance Navy." She shook her head. "I don't think we should give them free reign to poke around the vital systems. Engines. Sensors." She met his eyes.

"Weapons."

"I'm not going to lock them in sleeper pods for the whole trip, Williams." Assuming he could even fit Wrex into one.

"I'd be more comfortable if they didn't have access to engineering and the CIC. We -" She shrugged. "Humanity, I mean - have to learn to rely on ourselves."

"How do you get from 'relying on ourselves' to 'mistreating our allies?'"

"I don't mean we should mistreat them, Commander." She spread her hands. "I just think we should be prepared to go it without them. As noble as the Council members seem now, if their backs are against the wall, they'll abandon us."

That wasn't confined to just the Council members. Aside from his fellow soldiers, the same was true of pretty much everyone. "The Council's had a grudge against us since the First Contact War."

"I don't think it's a grudge. I think it's -" She rubbed her shoulder. "Look. If you're fighting a bear, and the only way for you to survive is to sic your dog on it and run, you'll do it. As much as you love your dog, it isn't human." She sighed. "It's not racism. Not really. Members of their species will always be more important to them than humans are."

"And yet I can give you a pretty long list of humans I'd have fed to the bear before King."

She blinked. "King?"

"Saint Bernard." He shook his head. "You sound like one of those Terra Firma Party pamphlets, Chief."

"Terra Firma is a pack of jackals. The founders had ideals. These days they just play off xenophobia and bigotry." She shifted her weight. "I hope my reasons are more rational. My father, grandfather, great-grandmother - they all picked up a rifle and swore the Oath of Service. I guess we just tend to think of Earth's interests as our own."

"All right." Michael nodded. "I can see where your concerns are coming from, Williams. But this is a multilateral mission. You're going to have to work with aliens, like it or not."

"It won't be a problem, Commander. You say 'jump', I say 'how high'. You tell me to kiss a turian, I'll ask which cheek."

"Pretty sure I won't ask you to kiss a turian." He shrugged. "Krogan, on the other hand..."

She almost snorted. "Anything you need, Commander?"

"We'll talk later, Williams."

"Looking forward to it, sir."

#

"Are you sure this time, Joker?" Michael raised an eyebrow. "The last two 'Prothean ruins' you found were a weird asari capsule and a mummified salarian." And the time he'd taken Williams, Wrex, and Tali out to recover some the one artifact they'd found that had been vaguely Prothean they'd nearly ended up getting eaten by a thresher maw. He had a sneaking suspicion Tali had found the whole thing entertaining. Wrex and Williams were bad influences.

"It's an anomalous reading, commander. That means I don't know what it is." Joker sighed. "Could be a dig site. Could be more smugglers. Could be a bar." He glanced down at his screen. "And this is the last system in this cluster, so..."

Michael rolled his eyes. "If it's a bar, it better have decent rum." He tapped his communicator. "Garrus, Kaidan, suit up."

"Bring me back a double."

#

"I've always found the snowblind rounds to be overrated." Michael shook his head. "Sure, they eliminate the heat problem, but they fire so slowly it doesn't make any practical difference."

"I'll give you that one. A good kinetic coil is a far better option." Garrus shrugged.

"What's a six letter word for rift that starts with an 's'?"

"Schism." Michael steered around a lava pit. "If we are going to keep dealing with geth, we should probably requisition some tungsten rounds. Maybe with a high caliber barrel?"

"Think we could get our hands on Armax?" Garrus leaned forward hopefully.

"Commander..." Joker's voice came over the communication unit. "Head's up, you've got incoming."

"Garrus, guns."

"On it."

#

Michael held up his fist, and his companions held their positions. Carefully and slowly, he moved forward. The geth turned just in time to catch Michael's omniblade in what passed for its face. He turned toward Garrus. "See, if it'd been using an Ariake scanner..."

"Just be glad they didn't have a Devlon, or their heavy turrets would have picked us off." Garrus slung his rifle back over his shoulder.

He casually picked the lock on the nearby weapons locker. "Hey, check this out." Michael held up an item.

"Dibs." Garrus immediately responded.

"He who picks the lock gets first choice."

"You're carrying a naginata." Garrus shook his head. "A helix kinetic stabilizer is far better suited to a striker model."

"In what galaxy?"

"Is this going to take long?" Kaidan glanced at them. "Because I left

my crossword puzzle in the mako."

#

"That's eleven for me." Garrus lowered his rifle, but didn't sling it.

"I think the floating ones count for Kaidan, not you." Michael shook his head and continued up the path. "And I'm at twelve. Alenko, you good?"

"Just grazed the armor, Commander." Kaidan nodded. "Nothing damaged but paint."

Something moved, and he held up a fist. Whatever it was had vanished into the shadows cast by the structure. "Something is down there. Spread out and check your targets."

He moved in, taking point. They were nearly to the structure when the enemy dropped out of the sky. Literally. Michael dove behind cover just as the geth landed and started opening fire. He saw Garrus take cover behind rocks further back on the path. Kaidan crouched behind part of the structure. He gestured, and saw the answering nod.

Michael dove out of cover, flung a grenade, and rolled behind the next cover as it exploded, taking out a group of the geth. As soon as the geth turned towards his location, Kaidan used his biotics to throw some of them at each other. Garrus directed his fire at the large one, keeping it from being able to bring its more powerful guns to bear.

As the geth started to turn, Michael took advantage of their momentary distraction to put a shot in the colossus. Sparks began to fly, and a moment later, it exploded. Without it to provide cover, cleaning up the rest of the geth was easy enough.

"Alenko, final score?"

"Sorry, Garrus. Had my head down for that last bit."

Michael sighed. "Told you we should have used a VI."

"Oh, like you've never hacked one of those before."

"Hey, I'll have you know I only cheat at dice."

#

Kaidan shook his head and smiled. Shepard and Garrus had the high ground, sniper rifles, and healthy competitive streaks. The geth really didn't stand much of a chance. He held his pistol at the ready, in the off chance anything actually got close enough for him to use it.

As soon as they'd cleared the geth, Shepard gestured for them to start moving in. The metal scaffolding was broken in places due to age, but here and there he saw signs that it had been repaired. "Supplies, Commander." He pointed.

"Between that and the geth, I'd say we are in the right place."
Shepard nodded. "Let's find ourselves an asari."

#

"Um..." They all turned to look at each other at the sound of the voice. "Hello? Could somebody help me? Please?"

Michael jumped down to the next level, and saw an asari apparently floating in midair behind a barrier. Her eyes widened when she saw him. "Can you hear me out there? I am trapped. I need help."

"Liara T'Soni?" He raised an eyebrow, then gestured for his companions to start looking for the controls for the barrier.

"Thank the Goddess. I did not think anyone would come looking for me." She managed, with some effort, to turn her head. "This thing I am in is a Prothean security device. I cannot move, so I need you to get me out of it. All right?"

First things first. "Your mother is working with Saren. Whose side are you on?"

"What?" She blinked. "I am not on anybody's side. I may be Benezia's daughter, but I'm nothing like her. I have not spoken to her in years. Please." Her voice trembled just a little. "Just get me out of here."

He scanned the barrier. It would pretty much take the mako's firepower to blast through, if not more. He really should upgrade their grenades. "How did you end up in there."

"I was exploring the ruins when the geth showed up, so I hid in here. Can you believe that?" She moved just slightly as though she were trying to gesture. "Geth. Beyond the Veil."

"As it happens, I can believe it."

"I activated the tower's defenses. I knew the barrier curtains would keep them out." She twitched a little again. "When I turned it on, I must have hit something I wasn't supposed to. I was trapped in here. You must get me out. Please."

"Any suggestions?"

Liara bit her lower lip. "There is a control in her that should deactivate this thing. You'll have to find some way past the barrier curtain. That's the tricky part. The defenses cannot be shut off from the outside. I don't know how you'll get in here."

"We'll find something. Hang in there." Kaidan promptly winced, and both Garrus and Michael turned to look at him. "Sorry, it was an accident."

"Be careful." She called as they started looking around. "There is a krogan in with the geth. They have been trying different ways to get past the barrier."

"Don't worry. Pretty soon, this will just be one of those things we can look back on and laugh about." Michael nodded to

her.

#

"Hmmm..." Michael narrowed his eyes. "Have you ever noticed that a mining laser is pretty much just a really big gun?"

"Now that you mention it." Garrus nodded. "Though it would be rather hard to calibrate in that setting."

It only took him two tries to access the controls. "Find cover. I'm going to use rule six."

Kaidan blinked. "Rule six?"

"When in doubt..." Michael hit the button before diving into cover next to the biotic. "Shoot something."

#

They found an elevator platform on the other side of the tunnel the mining laser had made. A few moments later, they'd found the asari again.

"How..." With effort, she managed to look over her shoulder at them. "How did you get in here? I didn't think there was any way past the barrier."

"We blasted through with the mining laser." He started towards the control unit.

"Of course. Yes. That makes sense." Her voice was doubtful. "Please..." She managed to point. "Get me out of here before more geth arrive. That button over there should shut down this containment field." He hit the button, and she collapsed with a loud "ooff."

Kaidan immediately went towards her, medical kit in hand. "Any idea how we get out of this place?"

She let him check her over, but it appeared she was undamaged. "There is an elevator back in the center of the tower. At least, I think it's an elevator. It should take us out of here. Come on." Liara led them back towards the platform.

#

"I-" Liara took a deep breath. "I still cannot believe all this. Why would the geth come after me? Do you think Benezia's involved?"

"Saren's looking for the conduit." Kaidan replaced his medical kit. As near as he could tell, there was nothing wrong a hot meal and some sleep wouldn't fix. "You're a Prothean expert. He probably wants you to help him find it."

"The Conduit? But I don't know -" She cut off as the whole area suddenly shook.

"What was that?" Garrus looked around.

"These ruins aren't stable. That mining laser must have triggered a seismic event."

"Of course it did." Shepard sighed.

Liara went to the platform controls. "We have to hurry. The whole place is caving in."

"Joker." Shepard hit his communicator. "Get the Normandy airborne and lock in on my signal. On the double, mister."

"Aye, aye, Commander. Secure and aweigh. ETA eight minutes."

"Not much margin for error." Kaidan shook his head.

#

They reached the top just in time to find a krogan. Michael sighed. And he'd gone and left his krogan on the ship. The krogan walked towards them. "Surrender. Or don't. That would be more fun."

He actually had a really good point. "We don't have time to deal with this idiot. Charge."

The krogan hefts his rifle. "I like your attitude."

#

Another of the barrier curtains. Michael was about to yell for them to find another way around when the whole place shook again and the barrier vanished. That was a lovely combination of helpful and not good. "Move. Move. Move."

He saw Liara try to use her biotics, and stumble. Kaidan picked up the slack, adjusting the trajectory of a rock that was heading towards them. Impressive. Michael picked Liara up and got her moving again as they headed up the shaking scaffolding.

They were barely out of the tunnel when it began to wrench and twist. That had cut things a little closer than he'd liked. The scaffolding was still shaking, and the platform swayed back and forth. Joker brought the Normandy in low.

Garrus jumped onto the Normandy's rear hatch door, and turned towards him. Michael threw Liara to him, and the turian caught her, pulling her further into the ship and out of harm's way. Kaidan followed, turning back as soon as he landed. Michael leaped onto the ship beside him as the platform collapsed. Kaidan put a steadying hand on his arm as debris spewed out of collapsing tunnel, and he saw the telltale blue of a biotic barrier shielding them. "Joker, we're clear. Go."

#

"Too close, Commander." Joker's voice came over the communicator as they regrouped in the debriefing room. "Ten more seconds and we would've been swimming in molten sulphur. The Normandy isn't equipped to land in exploding volcanoes. They tend to fry our sensors and melt our hull. Just for future reference."

Liara looked up, her face appalled. "We almost died out there and your pilot is making jokes?"

The man was called Joker. "Sometimes Joker's a real ass. Just try to ignore him."

"I see. It must be a human thing." Liara sat down rather heavily in one of the chairs. "I don't have a lot of experience dealing with your species, Commander."

Tali, bouncing a bit as she entered, sat down in the chair next to Garrus. Wrex sat in the chair next to Liara, giving her a suspicious look. But then, he gave everyone suspicious looks. It was one of the things he liked about Wrex.

Liara continued talking. "But I am grateful to you. You saved my life back there. And not just from the volcano. Those geth would have killed me. Or dragged me off to Saren."

Kaidan leaned forward. "What did Saren want with you? Do you know something about the Conduit?"

She waved her hands as she spoke. "Only that it was somehow connected to the Prothean extinction. That is my real area of expertise. I have spent the past fifty years trying to figure out what happened to them."

He knew asari lived longer than humans, but... "How old are you, exactly?"

"I hate to admit it, but I am only a hundred and six."

"Damn." Williams' eyes bugged out of her head a little. "I hope I look that good when I'm your age."

"A century may seem like a long time to a short-lived species like yours. But among the asari, I am barely considered more than a child." She set her hands on her knees. "That is why my research has not received the attention it deserves. Because of my youth, other asari scholars tend to dismiss my theories on what happened to the Protheans."

"I've got my own theory about why the Protheans disappeared." The images from the beacon were trying to push their way in again.

"With all due respect, Commander, I have heard every theory out there. The problem is finding evidence to support them. The Protheans left remarkably little behind." Liara looked around the room. "It is almost as if someone did not want the mystery solved. It's like someone came along after the Protheans were gone and cleansed the galaxy of clues." She gestured like a professor lecturing a hall full of students. "But here is the incredible part. According to my findings, the Protheans were not the first galactic civilization to mysteriously vanish. This cycle began long before them."

Michael wasn't sure if that made the situation better or worse. "Where'd you come up with this theory? I thought there wasn't any evidence." She started talking about subtle patterns. While she didn't offer any actual evidence, he got the sense that she knew what

she was talking about and not just going on a hunch. And that was enough for him at the moment. "Get to the point."

Liara nodded. "The galaxy is built on a cycle of extinction. Each time a great civilization rises up, it is suddenly and violently cast down. Only ruins survive. The Protheans rose up from a single world until their empire spanned the entire galaxy. Yet even they climbed to the top on the remains of those who came before. Their greatest achievements - the mass relays and the Citadel - are based on the technology of those who came before them. And then, like all the other forgotten civilizations throughout galactic history, the Protheans disappeared. I have dedicated my life to figuring out why."

Worse. The situation was definitely worse. But hey, at least he could make a blue woman's lifelong dream come true. "They were wiped out by a race of sentient machines. The Reapers."

"The-" She sputtered a little when she turned towards him. "The Reapers? But I have never heard of -" She blinked. "How do you know this? What evidence do you have?"

"There was a damaged Prothean beacon on Eden Prime. It burned a vision into my brain." The vision tried to crawl back, like it did every time he thought about it. "I'm still trying to sort out what it all means."

"Visions? Yes..." She bit her lip and tilted her head before nodding. "That makes sense. The beacons were designed to transmit information into the mind of the user. Finding one that still works is extremely rare." She shook her head. "No wonder the geth attacked Eden Prime. The chance to acquire a working beacon - even a badly damaged one - is worth almost any risk. But the beacons were only programmed to interact with Prothean physiology. Whatever information you received would have been confused, unclear." She had a remarkable gift for understatement. "I am amazed you were able to make sense of it at all. A lesser mind would have been utterly destroyed by the process. You must be remarkably strong-willed, Commander."

Normally, it was phrased as 'stubborn pain in the ass'. Williams cut off the lecture. "This isn't helping us find Saren. Or the Conduit."

"Of course. You are right. I am sorry. My scientific curiosity got the better of me. Unfortunately, I do not have any information that could help you find the Conduit. Or Saren."

And yet the geth had been after her for a reason. "I don't know why Saren wanted you out of the picture. But I think we'll be a lot better off if we bring you along."

"Thank you, Commander." She stood. "Saren might come after me again. I cannot think of anywhere safer to be than here on your ship. And my knowledge of the Protheans might be useful later on."

Wrex shrugged. "And her biotics will come in handy when the fighting starts."

Having seen Kaidan in action a few times, he couldn't argue with that. "We've already got other non-human species on the team. Might

as well add an asari to the team." He shrugged. "Maybe we'll pick up an elcor on the next planet."

"Long as it's not a salarian." Wrex settled back in his chair.

"Thank you, Commander. I am very grateful-" She swayed, and he caught her before she fell. "Whoa. I am afraid I am feeling a bit light-headed."

Kaidan immediately stood. "When was the last time you ate? Or slept? Dr. Chakwas should take a look at you."

"It is probably mental exhaustion, coupled with the shock of discovering the Protheans' true fate. I need some time to process all this." She nodded. "Still, it could not hurt to be examined by a medical professional. It will give me the chance to think things over. Are we finished here, Commander?"

He passed her to Kaidan and jerked his head towards sick bay. "Go see the doctor. The rest of you..." He looked around the room. "Dismissed."

#

"Mission reports are filed, Commander. You want me to patch you through to the Council?"

"Patch them through, Joker." He turned to face the holodisplay.

"Setting up the link now, Commander."

The asari councilor spoke first. "We've received your report, Commander. I understand Dr. T'Soni is on the Normandy."

The turian's eyes narrowed. "I assume you're taking the necessary security precautions?"

One day, he was really going to have to learn their names. "No, I just let the daughters of all my enemies wander freely through state of the art alliance warships."

"You are free to act as you see fit, Commander." The asari councilor nodded. "Our role is to offer guidance and advice."

"It's up to you if you're smart enough to listen." The turian councilor's mandibles clicked.

"Liara's on our side. The geth were trying to kill her." Which was all in the mission reports.

"Benezia would never allow Saren to kill her daughter." The asari councilor shook her head.

"Maybe she doesn't know." The salarian councilor tapped his... her... shit, he still needed to look that up too.

"Or maybe we don't know her." The turian councilor shook his head. "We never expected she could become a traitor."

"At least the mission was a success." The salarian nodded.

"Apart from the utter destruction of a major Prothean ruin. Was that really necessary, Shepard?" The turian glared.

"It was crawling with geth."

"Of course, Commander." The salarian nodded. "The mission must always take priority."

"Good luck, Commander." The asari actually smiled. "Remember, we're all counting on you."

Yeah, that was the problem.

#

"Commander, are you coming to check up on me?"

"A bit, yes." Michael nodded to Liara. "You look much better. How are you feeling?"

"Dr. Chakwas assures me I'm going to be fine. I was impressed with her knowledge of asari physiology."

"I haven't known her long, but I'm starting to suspect she knows everything."

Liara twisted her hands together. "I never properly thanked you for saving me from the geth, Commander. If you hadn't shown up..."

Michael considered taking a long step backwards. He was still a little unsure what exactly had happened the last time an asari had tried to 'properly thank him'. "I'm just glad we got there in time."

"So am I." She took a deep breath. "I know you took a chance bringing me aboard this ship. I have seen the way your crew looks at me. They do not trust me." She straightened her spine. "But I am not like Benezia. I will do whatever I can to help you stop Saren. I promise."

"Don't worry, Liara." He nodded to her. "I know you won't let me down."

She smiled brightly. "It means a lot to hear you say that, Commander. Thank you."

"Tell me about yourself, Liara." He leaned on the bulkhead a couple feet from her.

"Me?" She blinked. "I am afraid I am not very interesting, Commander. I spend most of my time on remote digs, unearthing mundane items buried in long-forgotten Prothean ruins."

It occurred to him that as a kid he'd played a fairly interesting video game for a while that had actually used that as the entirety of the plot. Plus pirates. "You must enjoy something about it."

"I love my work. Seeking out history's lost secrets has a special appeal for me." She waved her hands as she spoke. "You were actually touched by working Prothean technology. That is why I find you so fascinating, Commander."

"You sound like you want to dissect me in a lab somewhere."

"What?" Her eyes widened. "No. I did not mean to insinuate." She held up her hands. "Ah, I never meant to offend you, Shepard. I only meant that you would be an interesting specimen for an in-depth study. No-" She frantically shook her head. "That's even worse."

It was actually a bit difficult not to start laughing. "Calm down, Liara. I was only joking."

"Joking?" Apparently, asari blushed purple. "Oh, by the Goddess. How could I be so dense? You must think I am a complete and utter fool." She rubbed her forehead. "Now you know why I prefer to spend my time in the field with data disks and computers. I always seem to say something embarrassing around other people. Please..." She looked up at him. "Just pretend this conversation never happened."

"I can leave and come in again if you want to start over?"

"That would be wond..." She narrowed her eyes. "You're joking again."

"Yeah." He nodded. "I do that." He pointed his thumb at the door. "I should go."

"Goodbye, Shepard."

#

"If you want to nail Saren, you need to send someone who isn't restricted by policies and procedures."

"The only way we are going to manage this is to beat him at his own game. Speaking of which..." He tossed Garrus the stabilizer. "You're going to need all the help you can get."

"See, I should take exception to that, but I think I'd rather take this." He waved the stabilizer as he walked over to the workbench. "Want me to switch out your ammo unit while I'm at it?"

"Nobody touches my gun but me." He saw Williams turn around and immediately held up a hand. "Don't go there, Chief."

"Are you sure, Commander? Cause that's..." She smirked. "A really hard one to let go."

"You kind of set yourself up there, Shepard." Garrus shrugged.

"I can just see the look on Anderson's face if I tried reporting one of my officers for insubordination." Michael sighed.

#

"Tali, everything alright?" It was hard to read expressions with the

envirosuit, but she looked to be a few energy levels less than her usual self.

"I don't know." She looked up from where she was fiddling with an omnitool. "Your ship is amazing, and your crew's been really great to me. Especially your chief engineer. But I just feel..." She shook her head. "Out of place. The Normandy runs so smooth it feels like we're not even moving. And the engines are so quiet. How do you sleep at night?"

He blinked. "The silence wakes you up?"

"Back on the flotilla, the last thing you want to hear is silence. It means an engine's died or an air filter's shut down." She looked around, sitting back in her chair. "I guess you don't have to worry about that here, but old habits die hard." She let out a sighing sound. At least he assumed that was what it was, the envirosuit made it a bit hard to tell. "But it's more than just the silence. This ship feels so empty; it's like half the crew is missing. Back home, I couldn't wait to go on my Pilgrimage. I couldn't wait to get away from the crowds. Now that I'm out here, I kind of miss them."

Michael examined the work she was doing to the omnitool. "Sounds like the Pilgrimage isn't just about finding resources for the fleet. Maybe it's about teaching you to appreciate your people and culture."

"You're probably right. We quarians spend our whole lives traveling, but we never really leave home. The Pilgrimage has given me a whole new perspective on our culture." She picked up the microwelder again. "You know, there's always a few who go on their Pilgrimages and never return. I always assumed something bad happened to them, but maybe they just wanted a different life."

"Well, if you need a place to fit in or something to do..." Michael glanced over his shoulder. "Garrus overheated the main gun on the mako." He raised his voice. "Because he can't judge ground speed."

He wasn't overly familiar with turian customs, but he was pretty sure that particular gesture was intended to be rude. Tali giggled.

#

"Do you have some time to talk now, Commander?"

"Sure." Michael gestured for Kaidan to follow him. "Have a seat."

"Off the record?"

"Alenko, when it's just you and me, you can consider it off the record."

He sat down across from Michael. "Did you..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Did you really rob a bank?"

"No."

"Oh." Kaidan let out a relieved sigh.

"Not a bank. Two of them."

"Commander?"

"Well, one and a half. I was just the lookout on the first job." He leaned back in his chair, rather enjoying the various expressions crossing Kaidan's face. "What about you? Ever robbed a bank?"

"No, Commander." Kaidan chuckled. "Haven't stolen any cars either."

"What do they do for fun in Canada?"

"Nothing. It's illegal to have fun in Canada."

"That..." Michael shook his head. "Explains so many things."

Kaidan leaned forward. "We've played it pretty close to the book so far. But we're a long way from backup. We've got some tough calls to make. I'm just saying..." He shook his head. "Try to leave yourself a way out. I've seen what cutting corners can do to someone. And I'd hate to have that happen to you, Shepard." He caught himself. "Commander."

"Something on your mind?"

"I'm not questioning any decision you've made, Shepard. Let me be clear about that." He leaned back again. "It's just my experience that once someone lets something slide, it tends to pick up speed. You get my meaning?"

"Talk to me, Kaidan." He put his hands on the desk. "You've got a little black raincloud sitting over your head."

"I'll try to keep the deck dry." Kaidan took a deep breath. "You know the records about the biotic training out on Jump Zero? They're all classified. Because the Alliance made mistakes. After first contact, Conatix was set up to track element zero exposures and develop implants for humans. Once we had an embassy on the Citadel, Conatix could bring in 'experts' instead of taking it slow."

Michael asked a few questions about the experts. Biotics weren't his area of expertise. It sounded like a big mess. Secrets, so-called experts and important people who knew nothing, with a lot of scared kids caught in the middle. Jump Zero was starting to sound more like one of the 'homes for troubled youth' he'd routinely run away from rather than a school. "Doing what they thought was 'best'?"

"It wasn't best for us. They brought in an ex-military turian named Commander Vyrnnus. To introduce himself, he liked to say..." Kaidan deepened his voice. "I was at the helm of the dreadnought that killed your father." His voice returned to normal. "I told him my dad wasn't in the war. He'd retired to Vancouver. My family had an inland home that matured to new beachfront. Vyrnnus had it in for me after that. He cut corners, pushed hard. I mean, you either came out a superman or a wreck. And a lot of kids snapped. A few died." He shifted slightly. "The point of all this - I guess - is that when you cut

corners, it's not always obvious who pays for it."

"So why are you telling me this?" Michael frowned. "Is there something I can do to help you get over it?"

"I'm thirty-two, Shepard. You don't serve as long as I have without coming to terms with yourself." He shrugged. "You also learn that if someone is special to you, you help them. Try to keep them from making mistakes."

"So..." Michael folded his arms. "This is the part where you try to fix me?"

"That's not what I..." Kaidan rubbed the back of his neck. "If I'm out of line, just say the word."

"You're not out of line, Kaidan." He shook his head. "Hell, if anything, you're just reminding me of where the line is, and that's not a bad thing."

"I don't normally make a habit of complicating the chain of command."

"Well, that makes one person in this particular circus." Michael looked up at Kaidan. "That first bank job? I was twelve. Didn't realize how cold it could get in a big city like New York. Couldn't go to a government run shelter, because they checked fingerprints, not just IDs. So I played lookout. Took the credits. Got a place to sleep for a while and food I didn't have to hack the lock on a dumpster to get." He met Kaidan's eyes. "It's a big galaxy, Kaidan. And there is more than one world out there. Sometimes, there's more than one world inside a single city."

"I..." He nodded. "I get you."

"I'll think about what you said. And I do appreciate you saying it."

8. Chapter 8

"Tali."

She glanced up at him. "Yes, Commander?"

"You are in direct violation of rule four."

"Rule..." Tali tilted her head. "Four?"

"You're between me..." He pointed. "And the coffee."

"Oh." She stepped out of the way. "Sorry, Commander." She waited until he'd poured the liquid into a cup and taken a long drink. "What is rule four?"

"Never get between a marine and their coffee." He nodded to her, and gestured with the cup. "One of the universal rules for serving with the alliance."

"I..." She shrugged. "Good to know."

"You look..." He took another drink of the coffee and began grabbing something that vaguely resembled breakfast. "To be in a better mood."

"I'm sleeping much better now. I guess I'm getting used to how quiet your ship is." She followed him to the table and sat down across from him. "I still think a lot about my Pilgrimage, though. I know Saren's our top priority. But with all the worlds we go to, I was hoping to find something to bring back to the flotilla."

"Well, you've made some asari and salarian scholars happy with what you've scavenged thus far." He shrugged. "Though I guess nicely phrased thank you letters aren't all that useful when it comes to patching a hull." He poked at the less than identifiable substance on his plate. "What are you hoping to find?"

"Usually, people bring back something like a derelict ship we can use for salvage. But I need something bigger. There's a lot expected of me."

"What's so special about you?" He blinked. "And I meant that nicer than it sounded."

She chuckled, and then shrugged. "It's my father. He's the senior member of the Admiralty Board. He's one of only five people who can overrule the decisions of the Conclave for the good of the Migrant Fleet." She folded her arms. "My father is responsible for the lives of seventeen million people - our entire race is in his hands. And I'm his only child."

"So are you some kind of heir to the quarian throne or something?" He took another drink of coffee. "Should I be addressing you as Princess Tali?"

"No, it doesn't work that way. My father's position isn't hereditary. I'll probably never serve on the Admiralty Board myself." She leaned back in the chair. "Officially, I'm just the same as any other citizen. But it doesn't work that way in practice. People have always treated me differently because of who my father is."

"Special privileges and the like?" He tried not to taste the food.

Tali nodded. "I probably had it easier than most growing up. But it's not all good. People like my father have enemies. And they're not above using me to get to him."

"Well, if they try it here, they'll have to come through me first. And Wrex. Williams. Garrus. Kaidan. Everyone in engineering. Then probably Wrex and Williams again." He raised an eyebrow. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I guess I'm just tired of people judging me because of who my father is." She spread her hands. "Everyone's waiting for me to do something great on my Pilgrimage. Something that will forever change our lives for the better. If I don't, it's like I failed. And that reflects badly on both me and my father."

"Saving the galaxy isn't quite enough for them?" He set the plate

aside and refilled his coffee. "Tough crowd.

"Yes..." She sighed. "I know. But you have to understand quarian culture. We're a very insular society. The events beyond the flotilla don't matter much to the average citizen. Our greatest dream is that one day, we'll return to our homeworld and drive out the geth. But even if we stop Saren, that's not going to happen. There's still millions of geth behind the Veil. Until they're gone, our exile will continue."

"What would you need to bring back to make everyone happy?"

She drew a pattern on the table with her finger as she considered the question. "Something that would help us better understand the geth. They've changed significantly since the exile; they've continued to evolve. We've done our best to study them, but it's not easy. They're very reclusive. Until recently, they never went beyond the borders of the Veil. And the geth we run into now are under Saren's control. We'd need to find geth operating on their own. Independently." She looked up at him. "But I don't want this to get in the way of our mission, Shepard. First, we stop Saren. Then I'll worry about my own problems."

"Well, if we don't find anything good by the time we've saved the galaxy, we could always go steal you the Destiny Ascension or something." He put plate and cup into the cleaning unit.

"I..." Tali tilted her head, and then shook it. "Too difficult to hide."

"Good point. It probably requires a lot of maintenance too."

"Exorbitant fuel." Tali sighed.

"And it would be wrong." They turned to find Kaidan shaking his head at them.

"Well, yeah, that too." Michael nodded.

"Definitely wrong." Tali clasped her hands behind her back.

#

"I swear, Garrus, this is the last time I let you drive."

"You did notice the thrasher maw?"

"A billion miles of open planetary surface, and you run over the thrasher maw."

"It ambushed us, Shepard."

"Thank you, Tali."

"I went two centuries without encountering a thrasher maw." Wrex checked his shotgun. "Both times I get in the mako with the quarian, we run into one." He rolled his neck. "Might need to keep her around."

"I like you too, Wrex." Tali pried a rock loose from where it was jamming the gun.

Michael managed to free a tooth from the axle. Tali handed him the welder and he started patching the damage. "And you would have to get us into a ravine so the Normandy can't just pick us up."

"Remember the part where the thresher maw was attacking us and we needed cover?" Garrus glared from where he was applying omnigel to the busted power unit.

"Get to cover and crash into the ravine are not synonymous phrases, Vakarian." He looked up. "Tali hand me that..." He grabbed her and yanked her down from the top of the mako just before the shot impacted her location.

#

Adams tilted his head. "Commander..." He looked up at Michael. "That is not the mako you left in."

"Vakarian's fault." Michael pointed.

"Thresher maw." Garrus shook his head.

"That was the dumbest bunch of slavers I have ever encountered." Wrex headed towards the lockers. "And that's saying something."

"Sir?" Williams raised an eyebrow.

"Garrus wrecked our mako, and some slavers thought that made us easy prey." Michael shrugged.

Tali jumped down from the top of the mako. "So we stole their mako, and then went and blew up their base." She patted one of the wheels. "This one has an upgraded shield package."

"Does it now?" Adams grinned at Tali. He grabbed a toolkit. "Alright, let's check it out."

"Who the hell tries to take a krogan as a slave anyway?" Williams scratched her head.

#

Michael pulled up his VI, and saw a familiar name. He immediately tapped the message.

"I had to watch the vid three times before it sank in. Fucking Shepard. So then I went and grabbed little Mickey and made him watch it with me two more times. His crazy son of a bitch godfather is the first human Spectre. Don't worry. I told him he has to get through kindergarten before gets to be your sidekick. I'd have said to first grade, but I didn't want you to be intimidated. Fucking Shepard. Now go kick turian ass.

They'd be damn proud.

- Lars Brekin"

#

"Approach Control, this is the SSV Normandy. Requesting a vector and a berth." Joker's hands moved over the controls.

"Normandy, your arrival was not scheduled. Our defense grid is armed and tracking you. State your business."

Michael and Joker exchanged a look. Joker rolled his eyes. "Citadel business. We've got a Council Spectre aboard."

It took several seconds before Noveria Approach Control responded. "Landing access granted, Normandy. Be advised: we will be confirming identification on arrival. If confirmation cannot be established, your vessel will be impounded."

"What a fun bunch. I think I'll take my next leave here." Joker toggled the controls to bring the Normandy in.

"Well, we're off to a great start." Michael sighs. "Ten credits says I'm going to have to shoot someone before we leave the building."

"If I took that bet, you'd shoot someone just so you didn't have to pay up."

"Eh, probably." Michael headed back to grab his gear and his team.

#

Those were definitely cops. The leader read as the type that wore her badge jammed firmly up her rear end. It was the one to her left that tripped his instincts. Trouble. The leader held up a hand as they approached. "That's far enough."

"I'm on important business." He narrowed his eyes

She shifted slightly. "This is an unscheduled arrival. I need your credentials."

They read cops, but there was no outward insignia. Private security? "You first."

The other one, the blond woman, glared. "We're the law here. Show some respect." Well, now he was just going to have to fuck up her day on principle.

"I'm Captain Maeko Matsuo, Elanus Risk Control Services." The captain nodded to him.

Private security. "All you need to know is I have more credentials than you."

"They plan to be trouble, ma'am." The blond woman certainly knew how to state the obvious.

"I can't let you enter the port area without confirmation of your identity." The captain set her feet, and turned to look at the blond woman. "Sergeant Stirling, secure their weapons."

The pretend-a-cops went for their weapons. And then actually looked surprised to find his team's weapons pointed back at them. Not only that, both Kaidan and Liara flared their biotics. One of the rentals actually took a step back. Kaidan glanced at Michael. "We going to let them do this, Commander?"

"Nobody takes my weapon." Michael met the captain's eyes.

"Charge and lock." The sergeant's overconfidence was... a little sad, really.

"We are authorized to use lethal force." Captain Matsuo clasped her hands behind her back. "You have to the count of three to surrender your weapons." She actually started to count. He rolled his eyes. "One. Two. Thr -"

A voice over the intercom saved a lot of kneecaps. "Captain Matsuo. Stand down." The captain couldn't quite hide her relieved expression. The sergeant, on the other hand, looked disappointed. "We confirmed their identity. Spectres are authorized to carry weapons here, Captain." As soon as the rentals lowered their weapons, he gestured for his team to follow suit.

"You may proceed, Spectre. I hope the rest of your visit will be less confrontational." She gestured at the steps behind her. "Parasini-san will meet you upstairs." She turned and walked away.

"Behave yourself." The sergeant said the words like she was issuing a challenge before following the captain.

Yeah. Like that was going to happen.

#

He walked up the stairs to hear the familiar sound of him setting off alarms. A woman immediately began shutting the alarms down. "Weapons detectors. Don't mine the alarms." As soon as they were silenced, she nodded to him. "I am Gianna Parasini, assistant to Administrator Anoleis. We apologize for the incident in the docking bay."

"Someone piss in your security chief's coffee today?" Michael raised an eyebrow. Behind him, Liara made a slightly scandalized choking sound.

"She takes her job seriously. She is a valuable asset to the company." Parasini gestured at herself. "One of my duties is orientation of new arrivals. Do you have any questions?"

Michael glanced up at the various automated defenses. None of them were particularly impressive on their own, but the sheer number would have presented a challenge to bypass. "Pretty heavy security for such a small port."

"The Executive Board does everything in its power to protect the privacy of our client corporations."

She sounded like a VI. Something was slightly off. He decided to poke at it a bit. "Is this 'privacy' intended to hide illegal research?"

"This planet is beyond the jurisdiction of the Citadel. The law is what the Executive Board says it is." She waved a hand. "Do you know how valuable this planet is? How many advances in genetics and virtual intelligence got their start here?"

The virtual intelligence part caught his attention. If Saren was messing around with geth... "Has anyone unusual passed through here recently?"

"Unusual?" She shrugged. "An asari Matriarch passed through a few days ago. Lady Benezia."

"Benezia -?" Liara took a half step forward, her face shocked. "She is here?" Kaidan put a hand on her shoulder, and she stepped back again.

"'Passed through?' Where is she now?"

"Benezia left for the Peak 15 research complex days ago. To the best of my knowledge, she's still there."

"That's where I need to be, then."

"You'll need to ask Administrator Anoleis for clearance to leave this port."

And yet forgiveness was always so much easier to acquire than permission. "Where can I find the administrator?"

"His office is on the main level. Left at the top of the elevator."

"Understood." He inclined his head towards the door. "Can we go in now?"

"Of course. If you need any help, you can ask me at the administrator's office."

#

Michael waited until she'd walked away before turning towards Liara. "She is here." Liara shook her head. "I can't believe it." She took a deep breath. "I imagine you want to talk to me, Shepard. About my mother."

How did a woman who was a hundred and seven somehow manage to look like a lost twelve-year-old? "We talked about her before. But things change when you're up against something." Might as well cut to the chase. "If it's her or me, who would you shoot?"

"I meant what I said before. Her actions are wrong." She nodded. "If you would feel safer leaving me on the Normandy, I will stay. But I would like to see her. Maybe I can persuade her to come peacefully."

"I don't think that's likely." Better she not get her hopes up. "But you can try."

"Thank you, Shepard. That means a great deal to me."

He gestured towards the entrance. "Just remember the first rule of serving on the Normandy."

Liara blinked. "And what is that?"

"Don't shoot the commander." He started walking.

"No matter how much he asks for it." Garrus added as he followed.

"Wait..." Wrex shook his head. "Then how do humans handle promotions?"

#

Anoleis was not feeling permissive. He was considering the best way to go about needing forgiveness when Parasini hissed at him. He approached her desk. "You've never worked in the corporate world, have you, Commander? You can't bludgeon through bureaucracy."

Which was why he usually bypassed it entirely. She wanted something. "All right. What would you do?"

She leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Talk to Lorik Qui'in. You should be able to find him at the hotel bar. Can't say more. Not within earshot of Mr. Anoleis."

Interesting. She was acting nervous, but he was willing to bet it was exactly that. An act. "Talk to you later."

#

Lorik Qui'in proved to be a turian. A rather friendly one, for the most part. "Afternoon. Sit down, have a drink. What can I do for you?"

Michael declined the drink politely. "Are you Lorik Qui'in? I've heard you might be able to help me."

"You are the Spectre that just arrived, are you not? What could an old turian like me possibly help you with?"

That was actually a pretty good question. "I apparently need access to the garage before I can go anywhere."

"You need a pass." Lorik's mandibles clicked slightly. "How fortuitous." He settled back in his chair. "I'm the manager of the local Synthetic Insights office. For the moment, at least. Mr. Anoleis closed my office. He claims to be investigating reports of my corruption. The administrator is an interesting man. He has become quite wealthy since he took direct control of rents."

"And by 'rents', you mean bribes." Corrupt politicians. Were there any other kind?

"Indeed." Lorik nodded. "I acquired evidence of Anoleis' actions. His hired goons are ransacking my office to find it. I suspect your goal lies outside this port. Mr. Anoleis would be disinclined to let you wander." He folded his hands. "If you recover the evidence from my

office, I will give you my garage pass, as well as a sum of credits."

"That sounds like a fair trade."

"Violence against Mr Anoleis's thugs may be necessary. He has members of Hanshan's security teams searching my offices. He is paying them under the table. Ms. Matsuo is unaware of their outside employment."

Cops were annoying enough. Cops on the take were worse. "I'll take care of it."

"Excellent." Lorin handed him a small imprinted card. "Here is my pass into our offices. It will activate the elevator. The evidence is on my office computer. This OSD contains an encryption key to access it. Slide it into the drive and it will auto-execute." He returned to his drink. "And do try to keep blood stains off the carpets, would you?"

#

"Freeze! Hanshan security. This office is sealed."

It was bad enough they were dumb enough to point guns at him, but that guy had his sights skewed a full quarter inch. That was just insulting. "What'll you do if I don't?"

The guard actually looked confused by the question. "You're the Spectre, right? Lorik Qui'in is under investigation."

"Anoleis is paying you to shake this place down." He showed a hint of teeth. "That makes you a criminal." Michael twitched a shoulder. "I can kill criminals."

"You're bluffing."

"When the wager is one's life, is calling the bluff really so wise?" Liara flared her biotics. That was a good line, he was going to have to remember that one.

The guard apparently agreed. "He ain't paying me enough to take on Spectres, or Alliance troops, or whatever." She shrugged. "How about this? You pretend you didn't see us, we'll pretend we didn't see you."

And with that, she and the smart ones walked away. He looked around the office. That just left the dumb ones.

#

"Williams, he asked us not to get blood on the carpet." Michael looked over the ledge.

"Sorry." Ashley glanced down at her shotgun. "I wasn't expecting him to go over the railing."

"I feel really bad for whoever has to clean that up." He shook his head, and headed into the office.

#

After downloading the evidence, he started out of the office only to find Sergeant Stirling. "I don't think you're supposed to be in here, Shepard."

"Do you plan on making me leave?"

"Leave? You think I'm going to let you walk out?" She shook her head. "Uh-uh." She put a hand on her sidearm. "Anoleis would throw you offworld for what you did here. I won't. You know what we did to cop killers on my world?"

"Being a cop doesn't give you the right to break the law yourself." Kaidan spoke up from his left. "You accepted bribe money."

That was actually a very good point. But he could see from the sergeant's face that she wasn't having any of it. "I have a mission to complete. I did what I had to do."

"I don't care." She drew her sidearm.

He shot her before she could bring it to bear. The guards with her opened fire. Wrex rather casually grabbed one and sent him flying over the ledge to join the other one. "Wrex..."

"Oh. Right." Wrex pulled out his shotgun and splattered the next one over the wall.

#

They walked out of the now in need of a remodel offices to find Parasini waiting for them. "Commander. There've been reports of noise form the Synthetic Insights office. Would you know anything about it?"

"Of course not." He shrugged. "Why would I?"

She stared at him for a moment. "Smart ass." Parasini took a deep breath. "I can work with that. Meet me at the hotel for a drink, before you talk to Qui'in. I'll be waiting." She turned and walked away.

"What do you suppose that's all about?" Ashley raised an eyebrow at him.

"What, that?" Michael nodded in the direction Parasini had gone. "She's a cop."

"No way. She's a secretary." Ashley shook her head.

"Fifty credits." Michael held out his hand.

Ashley shook it. "You're on."

#

"Allow me to reintroduce myself. Parasini, Noveria Internal Affairs."

Michael held out a hand to Ashley. "Pay up."

"I left my purse in my other armor." Ashley shook her head.

He shrugged, and nodded to Parasini. "What do you want?"

"The Executive Board knows about Anoleis' corruption. I've been undercover for six months." She gestured. "I want you to convince Qui'in to testify against the Board. With his evidence, this planet can run profitably again."

Well, Anoleis had annoyed him. Unfortunately... "I need Qui'in's garage pass to complete my mission."

"You help my investigation; I'll provide whatever you need. Favor for a favor."

"Seems we'd help more people if we did as she asked," Kaidan said.

"Look, Shepard. I don't like this either. You Spectres play fast and loose with the law. That's bad for business."

He looked from her to Kaidan, and then back. "All right. I'll talk to Qui'in and see if I can convince him." Because negotiation was so very much his strong suit.

"Thank you. You know where I work. Come talk to me once you know if he'll play ball."

#

Qui'in was reluctant, but eventually agreed. He started walking towards Parasini's office. "How did you know she was a cop?" Ashley asked.

"She had that cop smell." He shrugged. Garrus made a rather pointed throat clearing sound. "Something in your throat, Vakarian?"

"No, no." Garrus shook his head. "Just caught a whiff of crap there."

Watching Anoleis get dragged off by a woman in a full skirt and heels was rather amusing. Parasini handed over the garage pass, and wished them luck.

"This is an outrage." Anoleis glared. "I'll see that you never work in this sector again." That line? Really? "You. Shepard. I demand you place this bitch under arrest."

"You have the right to remain silent. I wish to God you'd exercise it." Parasini dragged him out the door. "See you around the galaxy, Commander. I owe you a beer."

#

And there were geth in the garage. Because of course there were. Big ones. They finished dealing with them just in time for the cops to rush in and save the day. Michael tried not to roll his eyes.

"What did you do here, Commander?"

"Only what I had to. I didn't ask the geth to attack."

Immediately, she shook her head. "Geth? You expect me to -" He kicked the top half of one of the fallen geth. It slid, coming to a halt at her feet. Captain Matsuo blinked. "Where did they come from?"

He was saved from making a comment about mommy and daddy robots by Kaidan speaking up. "If I were to guess, Benezia packed them in the shipping containers she arrived with."

"I do not believe that. We did thorough scans of those. There were no power sources, no element zero masses..." She frowned. "If Benezia-sama's containers were packed with those things, there are many more out there."

"We may be seeing a lot more of these things in the coming months." He gestured at the dead geth.

"For three centuries, everyone has said, 'the geth do not come out of the Veil.' What is happening out there?" She sighed. "I must report to the Executive Board. If word gets out about loose geth, there may be an investor panic."

Oh no, not an investor panic. The horror. He rolled his eyes, and started walking towards the outer garage door.

Kaidan began pulling up his omnitool. "I'll tell Tali to..." He blinked. "Commander, what are you doing?"

"Stealing a mako."

"I'll drive." Garrus lifted the hatch Michael had just unlocked.

"Like hell you will."

9. Chapter 9

"Commander?" Kaidan glanced at the man driving the mako. "Did you squash a geth with a stolen mako?"

"Only because someone is having a little trouble with the gun." Shepard steered the mako around the remains of what had once been another mako.

"You noticed the blizzard, right?" Garrus shook his head, then hit the trigger for the missiles. "Heavy turret is down."

"Would that go into a report as a vehicle related fatality, or as use of heavy weaponry?" Kaidan looked over the sensor array. "More in the tunnels."

"That..." Shepard frowned as he brought the mako into the aforementioned tunnel. "Is actually a very good question."

"Geth are very pretty when they explode." Garrus shrugged, and pulled the trigger again.

#

Liara looked around. "Why are the turrets facing the wrong way?"

"They want to keep their people in as much as they want to keep others out." Kaidan narrowed his eyes.

Michael frowned. They'd run into fewer geth in the garage than he'd been expecting. He started to pull up his sensors when there was a strange banging sound from somewhere to their right. Weapons came up, but the sound did not repeat.

"Animals?" Kaidan looked around. "Wind? This place is in bad shape."

Ice and snow littered the area. It was possible something had gotten in. He was more concerned about what might have gotten out. They hadn't gone far when something jumped out at them. Strange tentacles attacked, swiping at them. Garrus was knocked off his feet, and the creature started to close. Kaidan and Michael fired simultaneously, blowing the creature back. "What the hell is that?" Michael looked at the remains. "Liara, any ideas?"

"Xenobiology is not my field." She shook her head. "Maybe someone in the labs knows."

He nodded, and offered Garrus a hand back to his feet. "Kaidan, tune your sensors to look for biologics and alert us if you detect any more of those things."

"Yes, Commander."

#

"It looks like you're trying to restore this facility. Would you like help?"

Michael nearly growled at the VI as he scanned the server. "How do I shut this thing up?"

"This system is monitored to respond to the name 'Mira.' May I ask your name?" The hologram's light flickered over the displays.

Might as well try the easy way. "Commander Shepard, Systems Alliance Navy."

"One moment, please. Service record confirmed. Due to the current emergency, you are entitled to Secure Access of all systems."

"That..." Michael sighed. "Takes some of the fun out of this." He quickly went through the list of what was wrong, and headed back up to the others.

#

More of the strange things attacked them when they went about restoring the damage. Kaidan looked at his medical scanner. The

creatures had some kind of venom, but the medigel was able to counter it without trouble. He took a sample for Doctor Chakwas, just in case.

It didn't take long for Shepard to get the disinfectant system working. He hit the switch, clearing the passage of the creatures. Kaidan looked at his combat scanner. "There don't appear to be any on the tram, Commander."

"Alright." Shepard nodded to him. "Let's go find some answers."

#

They stepped off the tram to find armed men. The men lowered their weapons almost immediately. The one that appeared to be in charge nodded to Michael. "Sorry. We couldn't be sure who was on the tram."

"I take it you've encountered those things." Michael raised an eyebrow.

"Encountered, fought, seen men ripped apart by." He shrugged. "We're all working on stims." He sighed. "Look. You're human, and that's enough that I won't shoot. But I'd like to know who you are."

"Call me Shepard." Michael looked around. "I was sent to find an asari Matriarch."

"Benezia?" The man folded his arms. "Yeah. She came through here. The aliens overran the hot labs last week. Only Han Olar got out, and he ain't all there anymore. The first we know, the bastards were clawing into my command post. We had a lot more staff then."

Aliens? Interesting. Clearly not native, which mean the folks here were playing with something they probably shouldn't have been. "I'm packing fire and steel. They want to fight with claws and teeth, it's their funeral."

"You got my support." The man nodded. "The board sent an asari to clean up the mess. She went to the hot labs yesterday. We haven't heard from her since."

He started trying to get what additional information he could, and then there was a scuttling sound. He turned in time to see more of the creatures coming up from vents in the floor. With his team's firepower added to the soldiers, the fight was over quickly.

"I don't know why they keep throwing themselves against our defenses." The man shook his head. "Even animals should learn not to stick their noses where it hurts."

Michael nodded, and led his team on. When they were out of earshot, he glanced back over his shoulder. "That read off to the rest of you?"

Kaidan nodded. "He wasn't curious about what those things were."

"Which implies he knew." Michael nodded. "Keep your guard up."

#

A brief conversation with Dr. Cohen revealed this particular group of scientists were messing with more than one thing they shouldn't have been. It was always sort of interesting how genius came with a lack of self-preservation instinct.

Getting into the medical lab was easy enough, and it took Kaidan only a couple minutes to get the cure together. The problem turned out to be another asari. Well, and a couple geth troopers, but mostly the asari. A shot to the head solved the problem. Funny how often that tended to be true.

Hans Olar informed them that the asari and her group had come up from the maintenance tunnels. Five minutes later, Dr. Cohen had his cure, and Michael had a pass to said maintenance tunnels.

#

"Are you here to secure the station?"

Alright, one man, sitting alone in a dark room, in an area infested by monsters. Right. This wasn't going to be trouble at all. "If by 'secure' you mean 'shoot every monster I see,' sure."

"I am certain you are having strong feelings. But what has happened here, it is our fault. You understand?"

Yeah, that much he got. Michael nodded. "I understand that we'll be dead soon. Talk fast."

"Binary Helix found an egg. It was on a derelict ship, thousands of years drifting. This was rachni ship. Inside they find many eggs in cryogenic suspension."

Rachni. Those were rachni. Damn it, he should have brought Wrex along. The krogan was going to be pissed he missed out. "They brought it here to wake it up?"

"Binary Helix plan to clone rachni. Mass-produce them. Create an army. But when they get here, they find this egg is not a common rachni. It is a queen. After she lays eggs, they move her to Rift Station. They are thinking that without her, they can raise the babies to be obedient."

He was pretty sure he'd seen this vid. Everyone died. The same thing had happened in the sequels. Some people just never learned. "Well, this is fascinating, but we don't have time to chat."

"These rachni are beyond saving. It is a sad thing, but they must be euthanized. I am thinking that the neutron purge must be set off."

Rule seven. When all else fails, blow something up. "How do we set off the purge?"

"Arming controls are nearby. All you do is insert the key. Then I will give Mira destruct co -" The man looked down at a something emerged from his chest. Yep, he'd definitely seen this vid.

The rachni flung the scientist across the room. Immediately, Michael and his team opened fire.

#

Kaidan sighed, and stood back up. The doctor had been dead before he hit the ground. He offered Shepard a security card. "These might be the codes."

"Alright, let's find the Mira terminal and set off the purge." Shepard nodded.

"Hopefully, that will get enough of them for the survivors to make it to safety." Kaidan followed Shepard, with Liara and Garrus a pace behind. "Rachni?"

"I know." Shepard nodded. "I am not looking forward to telling Wrex we fought rachni without him."

"May I recommend doing so from a safe distance, Commander?" Kaidan smiled. "Such as about three systems?"

"Alright." Shepard stepped back from the terminal. "Neutron purge initiated." He pointed. "This is the part where we run."

#

Michael glanced over his shoulder. "Liara?"

She took a deep breath, and nodded to him. He returned the nod, and they headed into the next room.

#

The asari matriarch stood at the top of the stairs. She was dressed in severe black, and wore an unusual headpiece. Her voice was slightly strange when she spoke to them. "You do not know the privilege of being a mother. There is a power in creation. To shape a life. Turn it toward happiness or despair." Benezia turned to a being trapped in a glass cage. "Her children were to be ours. Raised to hunt and slay Saren's enemies." She took a few steps towards them, and her eyes went to Liara. "I won't be moved by sympathy. No matter who you bring into this confrontation."

"Liara's here because she's a member of my crew." Michael looked around. He saw no one else, but that didn't mean they weren't there. Something was jamming their scanners.

"Indeed?" Benezia gave a slight shake of her head. "What have you told him about me, Liara?"

"What could I say, mother?" Liara's voice was raw. "That you're insane? Evil? Should I explain how to kill you? What could I say?"

Benezia smirked. "Have you faced an asari commando unit before? Few humans have."

So much for diplomacy. "There's obviously no peaceful way to settle

this."

"Indeed." Her biotics flared.

#

Kaidan got up a barrier just in time to block a crate Benezia flung at Shepard. Shepard retreated to his location, reducing the strain. On the other side of the room, Liara and Garrus quickly adopted a similar position.

The head of an oncoming geth blew apart, and Shepard lined up his next shot. Kaidan concentrated, creating another barrier to force the geth into a smaller area. Shepard was flinging a grenade into that area a heartbeat later.

One of the asari smashed her own biotic throw into his barrier, and Kaidan staggered backwards. Shepard rolled forward and drove his omniblade up under the commando's ribcage, sending blue blood spraying. Kaidan shook his head and flung out a wave of biotic energy, tossing the geth coming at the commander into the wall before taking aim with his sidearm. The other two asari commandos clearly weren't prepared for close quarters combat. Shepard hit one with the butt of his rifle, then simply headbutted the other before finishing them both off with two shots to the head each.

He regrouped with Shepard, moving in while Liara and Garrus provided cover fire. Liara tossed out a singularity to close off one of the doorways. Shepard tossed out a grenade as the geth attempted to come through the other, then he and Kaidan adopted a back to back position to finish clearing the area.

#

Benezia was slowly getting back to her feet. "This is not over. Saren is unstoppable. My mind is filled with his light. Everything is clear." She staggered slightly.

Michael wiped a bit of purplish blood off his face. "I expected better from asari commandos."

"I will not betray him. You will -" She started to turn towards him. "You..." Suddenly her voice and her entire body language changed. It was like he was looking at a different person entirely. "You must listen. Saren still whispers in my mind. I can fight his compulsions. Briefly. But the indoctrination is strong."

A trick? "How can he compel you? He's not even here."

"People are not themselves around Saren. You come to idolize him. Worship him. You would do anything for him." She shook her head slightly. "The key is Sovereign, his flagship. It is a dreadnought of incredible size and its power is extraordinary."

"The ship that attacked Eden Prime?" The one that looked like a grasping hand. "I didn't think anything that size could land on a planet."

"It has a very powerful mass effect drive. But that is not Sovereign's true power." Her hands started to shake. "The longer you

stay aboard, the more Saren's will seems correct. You sit at his feet and smile as his words pour into you." She shivered. "It is subtle at first. I thought I was strong enough to resist. Instead, I became a willing tool, eager to serve. He sent me here to find the location of the Mu Relay. Its position was lost thousands of years ago."

This was... He took a deep breath. A lot of people were dead for this shit. "Tell me where the Mu gate is before I lose my temper."

"Of course, Commander." She approached cautiously, and held an item out. "I transcribed the data to an OSD. Take it. Please." He did.

Liara stepped to his shoulder. "Knowing the relay's coordinates is not enough. Do you know where he planned to go from there?"

"Saren wouldn't tell me his destination. But you must find out quickly." She looked down for a moment, then back up at them. "I transmitted the coordinates to him before you arrived. You have to stop -" She started shaking. "Me. I can't -" She clenched and unclenched her hands. "His teeth are at my ear. Fingers on my spine. You should -" She started moving away. "Uh, you should -"

"Mother, I -" Liara took a step towards her. "Don't leave. Fight him."

Benezia turned and looked at her daughter. Her face was warm and loving. "You've always made me proud, Liara." And then Benezia vanished once more. "-Die."

#

Shooting her hurt. It was an odd feeling. He'd just gunned down a girl's mother right in front of her. Despite it being the right thing to do, it still... Shepard shook his head.

Liara knelt at her dying mother's side. Benezia looked up at her daughter. "I cannot go on." Her eyes went to his. "You will have to stop him, Shepard."

He gestured to Kaidan, and Kaidan took out his medical kit. Perhaps there was something that could be done, though he doubted it. Michael looked down at her. "You're free of the 'indoctrination' again?"

"I still hear it. Like metal on metal. Squealing and reverberating." Her voice grew weaker.

"Mother..." Liara clutched her hand.

"Good night, Little Wing. I will see you again with the dawn." Her voice slowly faded. "No light? They always said there would be a-" Silence.

Kaidan looked up, and gave a shake of his head. Benezia was gone. The medic moved to Liara, and put a hand on her shoulder. Michael sighed, and turned his eyes to the creature in the cage.

#

The asari he had stabbed was back on her feet. Sort of. She moved

jerkily, as if pulled by invisible strings. Right. Not creepy at all. Blood ran down her side. He stepped back as she went towards the creature in the cage. When she spoke, her voice raspy. "This one. Serves as our voice. We cannot sing. Not in these low spaces. Your musics are colorless."

Michael looked from the asari to the creature in the cage. Well. Shit. "Who am I speaking to here?"

"We are the mother. We sing for those left behind. The children you thought silenced. We are rachni."

He walked to the cage again, looking at the creature inside. It was different than the ones they'd killed earlier. "Did you order your people to kill the science team?"

"No. We were locked away here. The children are beyond our songs. They have been lost to silence." The asari didn't move, but the creature in the cage shifted to look at him. "You are not in harmony with those who hoped to control us. What will you sing? Will you release us? Are we to fade away once more?"

Kaidan's voice was quiet. "Commander. Those tanks on her enclosure? They're acid. Strong enough to dissolve any living creature. They must have installed them for a reason."

Liara shook her head. "They made a mistake. They let the krogan go too far. This is a chance for us to atone. She has done nothing to us."

"Liara's right." Kaidan nodded.

Garrus looked at them like they were both insane. He was pretty sure his own expression was similar. The asari spoke again. "Your companions hear the truth. You have the power to free us, or return our people to the silence of memory."

He'd done a lot of things but... "If I let you live, would you attack other races again?"

"No. We-" It hesitated. "I do not know what happened in the war. We heard only discordance, songs the color of oily shadows. We would seek a hidden place to teach our children harmony. If they understand, perhaps we would return."

"You could have calmed them if I hadn't set off the purge?"

"No. Our minds are not as yours. We can only learn to sing in harmony. Without a mother, children are lost to silence." The creature moved in the cage. "You should not sing of them in grey and violet. We would have stilled them ourselves."

That was... Good. Maybe. "Are you a survivor from the war? A clone?"

"We do not know. We were only an egg, hearing Mother cry in our dreams. A tone from space hushed one voice after another. It forced the singers to resonate with its own sour yellow note. Then we awoke, in this place. The last echo of those who came out from the Singing Planet. The sky is silent."

Michael glanced over his shoulder. Kaidan smiled at him encouragingly. He nodded, and turned back to the creature in the cage. As lines went, genocide was a damn good place to draw one. "I won't destroy your entire race. You'll go free."

"You will give us a chance to compose anew? We will remember. We will sing of your forgiveness to our children."

He touched the controls, setting the cage to release. The asari fell to the ground. The rachni turned back to look at them one last time before leaving. And as stupid things to do went, it was possible he'd have to go a long, long way to top that one. "Let's get out of here."

#

"What's our next move, Commander?" Ashley leaned forward. "Head for the Mu Relay?"

Michael shook his head. "The Mu Relay could link to dozens of systems. Unless we know exactly where Saren's going, we'd just be wasting our time."

"The commander is right." Liara nodded. "We cannot rush off blind. We still need to learn more about Saren."

"Who put you in charge?" Ashley glared. "Did the commander resign when I wasn't looking?"

"We're all on the same team here, Williams. She's just trying to help." He met Ashley's eyes. And she's just lost her mother, cut her some slack.

He saw Ashley give a slight nod at the unspoken part. "Sorry, Commander."

"This is a tough mission. We're all on edge. Everyone go get some rest. Crew..." He looked around at them. "Dismissed."

As they filed out, Joker's voice came over the comm. "Noveria report is away, Commander. You want me to patch you through to the Council?"

Might as well get the ass chewing over with. "Patch them through, Joker."

"Setting up the link now, Commander."

#

"Is this report accurate, Commander? You found rachni on Noveria?"

One of these days he was going to remember to look up their blasted names. He nodded to the asari councilor.

"And then released the queen." The turian councilor glared. "Do you have any idea what you've done? How many generations until they overrun the galaxy?"

"Three? No-" He shrugged. "Four."

"This is no joke, Commander. The rachni were one of the greatest threats the galaxy ever faced."

He 'accidentally' toggled the disconnect. Oops. Well, now when they chewed him out again, they'd have a reason. Never let it be said he wasn't helpful.

#

Kaidan looked up from the table where he was restocking his medical kit. "Commander." The pounding in his head was starting to fade, though not fast enough.

"Alenko." Shepard looked around. "Give me a sense of where the crew is at."

"Well, they know about the stonewalling you've had from the Council." Kaidan straightened.

"And what do they think?" Shepard raised an eyebrow.

He decided to go with blunt honesty. Shepard seemed to prefer it that way. "They're on your side. They're pissed about the resistance we're getting. Especially from 'our side.'" He sighed. "I'll have a better handle on all of it when my head stops hurting. Another L2 flare-up."

Shepard's face immediately grew concerned. "Anything I can do?"

"No, Commander. It'll settle down." He smiled. He shrugged. "It's rough sometimes, but they spike higher than a lot of L3s. I fared better than some."

He blinked when Shepard set a cup of coffee in front of him. "All you were tossing around down there, I'm not surprised. Nice work."

"Liara's having a rough time." He took a drink, and felt a momentary surprise that Shepard had actually remembered how he liked his coffee. "She's holding up though."

"She's finding out she's tougher than she thought." Shepard nodded. "Nice girl." He narrowed his eyes. "Take care of your head. We'll talk later."

10. Chapter 10

"If you are here to talk about Benezia's death, you need not bother. She brought it upon herself." Liara met his eyes, but he could see the tears welling up in hers.

It might have been easier, in a way, if Benezia had not managed to return to herself at all. "Don't pretend it doesn't bother you. She was your mother." Despite everything, it had still hurt to see his mother's obituary.

"She was..." Liara nodded. "But she was not. I prefer to remember Benezia as she used to be, before she was corrupted by Sovereign's power."

"I'd blame Saren." He folded his arms. "And if I were you, I'd want revenge."

"We have enough reason to stop Saren. I do not need to add revenge to the list." She squared her shoulders. "Benezia chose her path, just as I have chosen mine. I am with you until the end, Shepard."

Michael nodded. He felt like he should say something, but grief was never something he'd learned to deal with well. "I can leave you be, or we can talk about something else, if you like?"

"I..." She nodded. "I would like to talk."

"You were telling me about your interest in the Protheans?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Actually, I think I was talking about my interest in you." She sighed, and gave a small shake of her head. "And making a fool of myself in the process. As I said, I'm not used to dealing with people. Especially humans."

"Yeah." Michael nodded. "That's why I usually just shoot them."

That managed to get a small smile from her. "I did not really know much about your species when we first met, Shepard. I found it hard to take humanity seriously. Your kind always seemed so rushed and high-strung."

He leaned on the wall. "Has your opinion changed at all?"

"It has." She gestured. "I have been watching you and your crew. It has taught me a lot about your species." She waved a hand. "You humans are creatures of action. You pursue your goals with an almost indomitable determination. It is an admirable trait, but also an intimidating one."

Intimidating? Them? Well, no, maybe she had a point. A little one, anyway. "You're scared of us?"

"Unfortunately, the rest of the galaxy sees humanity as something of a bully. You run over anyone in your path to get what you want." She gave him an encouraging smile. "It's up to people like you to change their minds, Shepard."

He stared at her for a minute. "I, uh..." He shook his head. "Might not be the best candidate for that."

Liara shook her head. "There is a reason the Council chose you to become a Spectre. They saw something special in you -" She nodded. "The best of what humanity has to offer." She looked down, and then back up at him. "I looked into your history. I know what you did on Torfan. I cannot even imagine how horrible that must have been, but you did what had to be done."

His fist clenched, and he sighed. Not all of it had been necessary.

"Don't go behind my back. You want to know something about me, ask."

"I..." She nodded. "I apologize, Commander. After our last conversation, I was afraid I would say something stupid again."

"Liara, if I threw people off my ship for saying something stupid, I'd have to be first through the airlock." He shook his head. And he'd hacked the records a long time ago anyway. "Well, after Joker, anyway. Come to think of it, I'm not sure who that would leave on this flying circus."

She considered a moment. "Dr. Chakwas?"

"You've never seen her around small indigenous mammals." He shook his head. "She coos. It's actually..." He shuddered. "Kind of disturbing." He shrugged. "I should go." He took a few steps, then looked back at her. "You did good, Liara. Glad you're on my crew."

"Thank you, Shepard. That means a lot to me."

#

"Head better?"

Kaidan looked up at Shepard. "Good night of sleep seems to have done the trick." He smiled. "Anything you need, Commander?"

Shepard sniffed at the contents of his plate. "The name of whoever programmed the VI of the auto-chef and a couple grenades?"

"It tastes better than it smells." Kaidan gestured at his own plate. He hesitated. "You have time to talk, with all that's going on? I mean, there are reports to file. On the rachni, and on Anoleis."

"Paperwork is why we have an ambassador. Wouldn't want him to feel left out of the fun." Shepard shrugged. "Something on your mind?"

"I'm just looking for an ear." He sighed. "The debriefing wasn't the right place to say how ridiculous this is. Seems like every other race in the galaxy is wrapped up in their own problems. They don't want to see what's coming."

"Wanting to believe everything will be fine?" Shepard poked at the food on his plate. "Sounds like human nature to me."

"Yeah." He smiled. "I guess something things carry across species well enough. I should remember that after what happened with Vyrnnus." Kaidan felt a moment of surprise that he'd said that last part outloud.

"Don't tell me you and Vyrnnus hugged on graduation day?" Shepard raised an eyebrow.

"Before I met Vyrnnus, I knew as much as any other civilian. Aliens were weird, superior, and tried to tell us what to do." He shrugged.

"I mean, it's only been 26 years since first contact. That's not a lot of time to understand them." He finished his own plate, and pushed it aside. "It was Vyrnnus who made me see how human aliens are. They're not different or special. They're jerks and saints, just like us." He wrapped a hand around his coffee cup. "Hell, by the time I got payback, I didn't even want it anymore."

"I don't see you snapping very easily." Shepard laid his fork down. "What finally did it?"

"He hurt a girl. Broke her arm." He saw a strange expression cross Shepard's face before the commander nodded in response. "She reached for a glass of water instead of pulling it biotically. She just wanted a drink without getting a nosebleed, you know?" He shrugged. "Like an idiot, I stood up. Didn't know what I was gonna do. Just something. Any Vyrnnus lost it. Beat the crap out of me. Kept shouting how they should have bombed us back to the stone age. That's when the knife came up. A military-issue talon. Right in my face." He looked down. "I cut loose. Full biotic kick, right in the teeth. Almost as strong as I can manage now. At seventeen, that's something."

"Sat down by a kid." Shepard's voice was quiet. "Vyrnnus must have hated that."

"He didn't have time to hate it." Kaidan turned the coffee cup around. "I killed him. Snapped his neck. They probably could have saved him, if they got him to an infirmary quick enough. But they didn't. Caused a stir when they shipped him back home. BAaT training was shut down. Conatix folded a couple years later." He shrugged. "So yeah, maybe I hated that turian. I mean, if one ass was enough to judge a whole race, I'd hate humans too."

"The girl was Rahna?"

"Yeah." He wasn't surprised Shepard had put it together.

Shepard finished his coffee. "People are people. Doesn't seem to matter what color their blood is." He met Kaidan's eyes. "Keep that level head and we'll do fine."

"Staying reasonable is about all we've got left." He shook his head. "Everyone else in this galaxy seems to have gone out of their minds." He nodded to Shepard. "Present company excepted, of course."

"Damn." Shepard sighed, and shook his head. "You know the galaxy is in some real fucking trouble if we're the sane ones."

"I..." Kaidan blinked. "You know, when you put it that way..."

#

"- Oh, before I go. You said you're serving with Commander Shepard now? We saw him on the news here. He's cute. Later, sis."

Ashley stood there for several long seconds before turning around. "Tell me you didn't hear that."

"Afraid I did." Michael watched as red crept across her face.

"Oh, shoot me now." She ran a hand down her face. "One of my sisters." She pointed back at the face still visible on the screen. "That's Sarah. The youngest." She took a deep breath. "What's up? You didn't come by to eavesdrop on family mail?"

Half the time he walked by, she was checking the family mail. "Your family seems to be important to you."

"Yeah, we've always been close. My and my sisters, especially." She gestured to a picture of herself with three others. The family resemblance was quite strong. "With Dad on duty so much, I had to help Mom raise them."

For a moment, he flashed back to the vid his eldest cousin had sent. She'd made a comment about being a monkey wrangler. "Did your father serve with the fleet?"

"Yeah. Took any crap posting he could get that offered space time." She told him about her family, coming very close to bragging at several points. Then she told him about how she and Sarah had become close. The story involved someone getting taken away in an ambulance, which in retrospect made perfect sense. "The Williams women are a decisive bunch, Commander. We do things when we're ready. Not before, not after."

"Where was your father during this? Wasn't your family stationed near him?"

"Dad always wanted to serve in space. But he wanted us to have real ground under our feet. He'd say, 'Space is beautiful, but you can't raise a family there.'" Her eyes took on a faraway look. "I cannot rest from travel: I will drink life to the lees. All times I have enjoy'd greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those that loved me, and alone. For always roaming with a hungry heart. Much have I seen and known. Cities of men, and manners, climates, councils, governments..." She smiled.

Tennyson. "I didn't know you like classical literature." He saw a moment of surprise on her face. Libraries had heat and working bathrooms, and as long as you had a book in your hand, people left you alone.

Ashley smiled. "'Ulysses was Dad's favorite poem. Every time he shipped out, he recorded me reading it. He had a dozen versions when he retired."

"Does he still like it?"

"I sure hope so." Her smile became sad. "I read it to his grave every time I go home." She twitched a shoulder. "Dad passed on a few years back. He's probably still watching, though." She winked. "So behave."

"I thought you said he was dead." He frowned in confusion.

"You know. From heaven. Wherever that is." She gave him a slightly self-conscious look. "That's not a problem for you, is it. That I believe in God?"

"I've set foot in church a time or two." He waved a hand. "Haven't

caught fire yet. Well, haven't caught fire inside a church, anyway."

"You believe in God?" She looked startled.

"Harder question to answer than it sounds." He shrugged. "I'm a fan of Saint Nicolas though. Sailors, snipers, and thieves."

"I seem to recall it being repentant thieves." She chuckled. "You stole a mako, and you don't feel bad about it at all."

"Proverbs 6:30. Do not despise a thief if he steals to satisfy his appetite when he is hungry, or if there are geth that need to be blown to little bits."

"Pretty sure there are no geth in the Bible, skipper." She shook her head. "Or explosions."

"What boring version did you read?"

#

"So why take to the mercenary life?"

"Lots of reasons." Wrex examined the selection of shotgun modifications.

"Such as?" Michael pushed the box of ammo blocks over.

"Such as..." Wrex picked up a tungsten block and looked it over. "I need to get out of our system. I needed to eat. I needed to survive."

The main reason Hackett had given for getting him out of the court martial had been to prevent him from going mercenary. "Why not stay and help your people?" He began removing the damaged ablative coating from his armor.

"I tried to help. That's why I had to leave." Wrex gestured at the frictionless mod, and Michael nodded permission.

"What happened?"

"I was betrayed." Wrex shrugged, and began taking his shotgun apart. "I was head of a small tribe. We were trying to restore order after the war, but the other tribes were against us. They followed Jarrod, one of the few warlords who survived the war with the turians. But he was old, and so were his ideas. He wanted to continue the war. He wanted us to fight: turians, salarians, each other. It didn't matter who as long as we were fighting."

He started applying the new coating. "What did you want?"

"I just wanted Jarrod to shut up. To stop his ranting. I wanted him to stop leading the tribes astray. But he couldn't understand how much things had changed." He was silent for a moment as he focused on a solder. "We didn't have the numbers to go to war. Even if we did, the genophage made sure we couldn't replenish our numbers fast enough. I told them all to forget about war. We needed to focus on breeding. At least for one generation. And for a while, we were

getting through. Some of the tribes started coming around."

"I take it the warlord didn't appreciate that." He finished the chestplate.

"No. He didn't. He arranged a Crush with the tribes. A meeting on neutral ground. He wanted to talk. We met at the Hollows, near the graves of our ancestors. The skulls of our dead laid bare to remind us where we come from, and where we all go." He shrugged and started reassembling the shotgun. "It's as sacred as any krogan place can be. Violence is forbidden."

"Sounds like a trap to me. You must've expected as much." He finished the ablative coating, and started looking over the exoskeleton. That mod would take most of the day. Tali'd offered, but he found working on his gear relaxing. She was over on the other side of the hanger, getting a hand to hand combat lesson from Ashley. She wasn't doing so well, but they both seemed to be enjoying themselves.

"I did. But when your father invites you to a Crush..." Wrex snapped the shotgun up and examined the modification. "Well, there are some laws even we hold sacred."

"Jarrod was your father."

"He was. Until that day." Wrex started in on the ammo block. "We talked. But we didn't get anywhere. When it was clear I wouldn't join him, he gave the signal. His men leapt from the graves of our ancestors like krogan undead. The few that were loyal to me died quickly. I escaped with my life. But not before I sank my dagger deep into my father's chest. That..." He examined his handiwork. "Is why I left. And that's why I'll never go back."

Earth he'd revisited. Same with New York. But Montana... "No other family?"

Wrex smirked. "You trying to make me cry, Shepard?" He shrugged. "I've got some unfinished business with my family. But that's all."

"What kind of business?"

He sighed. "Before I left, I made an oath to my father's father. I swore to recover my family's battle armor. It was taken from him after the uprising. It's a relic; useless, really. But it was worn by five generations of my family before the war. It's rightfully mine. Originally, it was taken by the turian military. We weren't allowed armor or weapons after the war. Now, it's in the hands of Tonn Actus. A turian scum who collects relics from the war. He's made millions selling krogan artifacts that were stolen from my people. He's got several bases where he stores his goods. All fortified and guarded. I just don't know which base has my family's armor."

If he'd been able to get his grandfather's... Yeah, he might have gone back to Montana for that. "Note down where you want to start looking." He started the exoskeleton modification. "If we happen to end up in the neighborhood..."

"I'll upload the data to your nav system." Wrex nodded to him. "But, Commander, I want to be there when you find him."

#

Hackett's signal popped up on his communication unit. "Normandy? Admiral Hackett here." Admiral. An official communication then. He wasn't sure if he was relieved by that. "We're getting reports warning of a marked increase in geth activity in the Skyllian Verge. Surveillance drones have identified geth outposts on four different planets in the Armstrong Cluster. We need someone to take them out."

"I'm on it, Admiral."

"Finding Saren is still your top priority. But you've got experience fighting the geth. You're the logical choice to take out these outposts. We're transmitting the locations of all known geth outposts in the Armstrong Cluster to the Normandy now. Admiral Hackett out."

#

"Tali."

"Yes, Shepard?"

"Want to go hunt some geth?"

He shook his head as she nearly bowled him over on the way to the mako.

#

"You let Tali drive."

"She hasn't run us into any ravines or thresher maws."

"You're only letting her drive because you want to shoot something."

"It is my turn."

"Yes, but I look better doing it."

"In your dreams, Vakarian."

"Well, I guess I'll just have to get my rifle ready to take care of the ones you miss."

"I'm not the one who missed the geth with the rocket launcher."

"If someone knew how to keep a mako steady..."

Tali glanced at Kaidan. "Do they do this the entire time?"

He sighed, and just nodded.

#

Garrus and Michael climbed out of the mako. He sealed the hatch behind them, and tapped the top before leaping off. "Go."

Tali drove away, and he and Garrus took their positions. As soon as the geth revealed their positions by trying to fire on the mako, he and Garrus began picking them off. Inside the mako, Kaidan focused on shooting the heavy turrets while Tali kept the mako moving.

"She's a hell of a driver." Michael pulled the trigger and lined up his next shot.

"I don't think any of them have managed to hit her yet." Garrus put a round through a geth sniper that was trying to pinpoint their location.

#

"Strange. I expected one of these outposts to be the main base of operations for this incursion." Garrus shook his head.

Tali bounced. "Hold on. This receiver's picking up some kind of transmission. Based on the signal strength, I'd say it's coming from inside this star cluster."

"It must be a message from the primary geth base. We can use the signal to lock onto its location and take them out."

"Good work, Tali. Get us the target." Michael nodded to Tali.

"Yes, Commander."

#

"We just received your report." Hackett's voice came over the communication unit. "Looks like this geth incursion was bigger than we thought. They were probably preparing for a major offensive in the system. We're increasing patrols in the Armstrong cluster to make sure they can't establish another foothold in the region. Nice job, Shepard. You saved a lot of human lives on this mission. Hackett out."

#

Tali ambushed him before he was all the way down the stairs.

"Shepard, I need to talk to you. It's important."

He shrugged, and led her into his office. "Is something wrong?"

She took a deep breath, causing her mask to make a slight whistling sound. "You know the data you took from those geth control nodes? The information you uploaded to Alliance control? I want a copy of it."

A light turned on. "You want to bring this data back to the Migrant Fleet."

"Those files have information that could be vital to our efforts to understand the geth." She bounced up on her toes a little. "It could be the key to helping us reclaim our homeworld."

Michael began copying the data over. "It'll take years to decipher and analyze the data."

"Maybe even decades. But it's worth the time. This information will give us new insight into how the geth have changed and evolved over the past centuries."

"Alright." He took the OSDs out of the system, and then started to offer them to her. He raised an eyebrow. "Sure you don't want to just go steal the Destiny Ascension?"

"Well..." She held out her hand for the disks. "Can't we do both?"

"Nope." He handed them over. "If you want the disks, you are going to have to settle for something smaller."

"Can I have the Normandy?"

"No."

"My people -" She looked down at the disks. "I owe you a great debt. One I can never repay. The only thing I can offer in return is what you already have: my solemn promise to stay with you until Saren and his geth armies are defeated."

"That's all I need." He nodded. "Well, that and somebody to finish the engine tweak to the mako she's been promising."

"Thank you, Shepard." She gave a playful salute before heading out of his office.

#

They headed back into the Citadel to resupply. Shepard pulled up his bank account, and then let out a low whistle. Nobody had mentioned to him that Spectre paid fairly well.

#

"They told me it was you, but I didn't believe it. Shepard grew up and turned into a soldier."

Kaidan saw Shepard's eyes narrow. "An impatient soldier. Who are you, and why are you in my way?" Shepard was hard to read, but he was pretty sure the commander knew exactly who he was talking to.

The man shrugged. "Name's Finch. You probably don't remember me, but we ran together in the Tenth Street Reds." Finch smirked, and looked Shepard over. "Maybe you don't remember it yourself, running in a gang. None of the vids mention it when they're talking about you."

"The vids never tell the whole story." Shepard shrugged. "So what can I do for the Reds?" Kaidan glanced at him, but said nothing.

"One of the Reds, Curt Weisman, got picked up by turians. We'd like you to talk to the turian guard in the bar and get Curt out."

"What was he arrested for?" Shepard folded his arms.

"Some stupid minor offense. Maybe he had a little red sand. You know

how the turians are." Finch waved a hand. "They declared him a problem, and they're shipping him back for a trial."

Shepard raised an eyebrow. "What was one of the Tenth Street Reds doing in turian space?"

Finch actually had a proud smile. "Since your days, the Reds have expanded. We do some salvage, a little shipping here and there, that kind of thing."

"You're not asking me to break Weisman out of jail, are you?" Shepard's eyes narrowed.

"Of course not." Finch shook his head. "But word has it you've got some pull with the aliens. All we're asking you to do is pull a little for us."

"I'll talk to the turian and see what I can do."

"Thank's Shepard." Finch held his hand out, and Shepard shook it. "I knew you'd remember your old friends. The guard's over in Chora's Den. Take care of this, and you'll never see me again."

Shepard watched the man walk away. He didn't turn to look at Kaidan. "Suppose you want to know what that was about."

"Not if you don't want to tell me, Commander."

"If it's as minor as Finch says..." Shepard shook his head. "Then I'm going to get him out. I'd appreciate it if that stays between us."

"I..." Kaidan nodded. "Alright."

#

He found the guard in Chora's Den. With a sigh, Michael walked up to him. "You've got a prisoner named Curt Weisman. I'd like that prisoner freed."

"I'd like a lot of things, human." The guard shrugged. "Desire forms the foundations of organized society. That said, the xenophobe will remain in turian custody. This is not negotiable."

Xenophobe? Last time he'd talked to Curt, the man hadn't even encountered an alien. "What sentence is Weisman likely to receive?"

"Considering that he attempted to commit a xenophobic hate crime, I would expect him to receive a lifetime imprisonment." The guard shrugged.

Lifetime. What the hell? "Why are you calling him a xenophobe?"

"The human acknowledged his affiliation with several anti-alien organizations. His crime specifically targeted turians as a species. It was a hate crime, and will be treated as such at his sentencing."

Yeah. This didn't sound exactly like carving 'turians suck' onto the

side of an aircar. "What crime did Weisman commit?"

"He attempted to poison medical cargo being sent to a turian colony to treat an outbreak of a dangerous disease." The guard's eyes narrowed. "If he had succeeded, millions would have died. This human is a dangerous xenophobe."

Well, the good news was that Curt was obviously still as incompetent as ever. "Thanks for the information." And Finch still needed a punch in the face. "One of Weisman's friends was less than honest with me."

"I understand." The guard looked slightly relieved. "Weisman was too well-supplied to be acting alone."

"They'll try again." Michael shrugged. "And they are dumb enough to try a guns blazing approach."

"Thank you for the information." The guard nodded. "We'll increase the guard on his cell."

#

"I knew you'd rat us out, Shepard." Finch was there before they'd even made it out of Chora's Den. "Now it's payback time." Finch waved a hand. "When we're through telling our story, the aliens will all know what the first human Spectre really is."

Michael turned to the guard who'd walked up beside him. "I stole a couple aircars. Some larceny. Now I break into the bases of bad guys and mess with their stuff. Sometimes I make their stuff explode." He turned back to Finch. "You think I care what the aliens think of me, Finch?"

Finch looked taken aback. "But this is your career. You'd throw it all away like that?"

The man really was stupid. "I can legally execute everyone in this bar. You think the Council cares about my shady past?"

Next to him, the guard shrugged. "The Spectre had overcome a troubled youth to lead a proud military career. The turians would not care about such things." Dammit, now there was another cop he was starting to like. "And I doubt your lies would fool the salarions or the asari."

"Fine, Shepard." Finch glared at him. "You're right. You're not one of the Reds. Maybe you never wore." He spat the words as though he expected them to hurt. Maybe ten years ago they would have.

The guard shook his head. "That man is a xenophobe who thinks he can blackmail a Spectre. You should have killed him."

If Kaidan hadn't been only a couple feet behind him... "I don't need the target practice." Michael shrugged. "And someone else will shoot him soon enough." He glanced at the guard. "Fifteen credits says it'll be you, when he comes back in an hour with two guys who think they are tough and tries making threats."

"So noted. Goodbye, human." The guard nodded. "It will be interesting

to see what kind of Spectre you turn out to be."

#

Kaidan followed Shepard back to the market. Before they got there, Shepard stopped and turned towards him. "I was a member of the Reds for two years."

"Did you..." He wasn't sure how to ask. "So you knew Weisman?"

"I used to." Shepard shrugged. "Maybe. Not sure I'd even recognize him anymore. Hell, not sure I'd even recognize that me anymore." He shook his head. "Back when I ran with the Reds, I had a ponytail."

"I..." Kaidan blinked. "I'm having serious trouble picturing that, sir."

"That's because I burned all the pictures of that." Shepard sighed. "Back then, it wasn't legal but..." He nodded in the direction of Chora's Den. "It wasn't that. I never did that shit."

"I know." Kaidan smiled.

"What the hell were we down here for, again?"

"You said something about a shield moderator?"

"Right. You know, you should consider upgrading to a medical interface." Shepard looked him over. "Might help with the flareups you get juggling geth and making sure nobody shoots me."

11. Chapter 11

"Is that..." Garrus's eyes gleamed at the sight of the new sniper rifle.

"Mine." Michael narrowed his eyes.

"Can I..."

"No."

"But..."

"Get your own." Michael jerked his head towards the quartermaster. "He's got clear-"

He didn't get to finish the sentence before Garrus was on his way. Michael just shook his head, and went to the workbench.

#

"Now this is the place. My armor is here somewhere."

"Wrex." Michael glanced around the corner and removed the top of a smuggler's head with a shot. "Less talking, more shooting."

Wrex took a deep breath, and flared his biotics, throwing a half

dozen crates into the smugglers that had just charged into the room. They went down like bowling pins, and he took out his shotgun almost casually. Then started giving Tali a brief lecture on reloading in combat conditions, while demonstrating.

Michael just shook his head, and took out the sniper trying to get into position. That krogan was starting to grow on him.

#

"Joker, I need the overhead comm."

"Alright, Commander." Joker flipped a switch.

Michael leaned on the console. "People, I can say with all honesty that this crew is one of the finest the alliance has to offer. I am proud to serve with each and every one of you. And I want to make this very clear." He took a deep breath. "If I catch the person who smuggled that infernal little space rat-monkey thing onto this ship they will be marinated in lemon juice and fed to Wrex." He hit the toggle.

"Uh..." Joker blinked. Then he shook his head. "No, I don't think I want to know."

#

"You didn't space the pyjack, did you?" Kaidan glanced up as Shepard started inflicting abuse on the coffee machine.

"Liara actually quivered her lip." Shepard shook his head. "There was lip quivering, on my ship." He waved a hand. "Pretty sure Tali was doing the same thing. And Dr. Chakwas..." He shuddered.

"So..." It was actually just a tiny bit adorable seeing how kind Shepard was being where Liara was concerned. Part of him was starting to wonder if Shepard's interests were starting to go beyond the strictly professional.

"Williams is shipping the rat-monkey off to her sister." Shepard wrinkled his nose, and dumped the coffee into the sink. After some cursing, the second cup followed. He narrowed his eyes at the coffee machine. "I am in the mood to space something. This is the wrong time for you to be uprising."

"Sir, the coffee machine doesn't even have a VI." He stood and took the cup from Shepard. It took him only a few seconds to unjam the control and fix a proper cup. He handed it to Shepard.

"That better not be a smile on your face, Alenko." Shepard accepted the cup.

"Who, me?" Kaidan forced his face back into a stern expression. "I sent the information from the data node we recovered back to Alliance headquarters."

"I don't care how much lip quivering occurs..." Shepard took a long drink from the cup. "Next time, we are just shooting all the damn rat-monkeys."

#

"You see much action in C-Sec?" Michael passed the ammo unit to Garrus.

"Well, not as much as you." Garrus shrugged. "But yeah, I've seen some interesting things."

"Anything stand out?" He adjusted the combat scanner, then frowned and started tinkering with it again.

"I remember this salarian geneticist I was sent to investigate. That case was a bit..." Garrus tossed microtool aside and grabbed a different one. "Disturbing."

"What happened? Why were you investigating him?"

"I was tasked with tracking black market trade on the Citadel. Most of it's harmless. Nothing I needed to pursue. But during the course of my investigation, I noticed an increase in the trade of body parts. Organs, mostly." Michael went slightly still at Garrus's words, then continued adjusting the scanner. "We usually get a few of those, but not the numbers I was seeing. We weren't sure if there was a new black market lab or if some freak was harvesting organs from citizens."

"You've seen this before on the Citadel?"

"Every so often, some lab sells unwanted parts through the black market. But they're not as bad as the psychos. I remember this one elcor diplomat we caught in my first year on the job. He was hacking people up and selling their organs. Had the station in a bit of a panic. But this case wasn't that clear cut. Turns out there was more going on than we first realized."

He examined the scanner again, then went to work on the ammo unit. "So how did you figure out what was happening?"

"First, we got hold of a sample and ran DNA tests. The weird thing was, the match led us to a turian who was still alive and was very convinced he'd never lost his liver. After a bit of digging, I discovered this turian worked briefly for Dr. Saleon, the geneticist." Garrus finished with the ammo unit, and looked the new rifle over as if deciding what other modifications to add. "So I went to his lab, hoping to find evidence of cloned organ development. But there was nothing. No salarian hearts, no turian livers, not one krogan testicle."

Michael blinked. "You're kidding, right? Why would anyone want krogan testicles?" And he really hoped he didn't regret asking that question.

"Some krogan believe that testicle transplants can increase their virility. Counteract the effects of the genophage. It doesn't work, but that doesn't stop them from buying. They'll pay up to 10,000 credits each. That's 40,000 for a full set."

"And yet that still fails to be an attractive line of work."

"Well, somebody's making a killing out there." Garrus shrugged.

"And the geneticist?"

"I brought in some of his employees for interrogation. To see if I could get them to talk. While I was interviewing one of them, I came across something suspicious."

"Good thinking. Lackeys are always easier to scare." And often dumb enough to let things slip by accident.

"Exactly. Though in this case, it paid off in a different way. One of my detainees started bleeding profusely during the interview. We offered to patch him up and he got frantic. Freaked out. I ordered a full exam, to find out what was going on. Our medics found incisions all over his body. Some of them fresh. That was our big break. These people weren't just Dr. Saleon's employees. They were test tubs. Walking, living test tubes."

"He was growing parts inside these people?" Michael stared.

"Exactly. He cloned their organs right inside their own bodies. Then he harvested them and sold them off. Most of the victims were poor. He'd pay them each a small percentage of the sales, but only if the organs were good. Sometimes an organ wouldn't grow properly, so he'd just leave it in them. Most of them were a mess, but only on the inside - hidden so nobody could see it."

"You shot him in the face, right?" Michael raised an eyebrow.

Garrus gave him a frustrated look. "That's the worst part. We never caught him."

"Why not?" Michael sat up straight. "What the hell happened?"

"He ran. Blew his lab, grabbed some of his employees, and headed for the nearest space dock. By the time I found out, his ship was already leaving. He threatened to kill his hostages if we tried to stop him."

From the sound of it, they were dead anyway. "But you went after him, right?"

"I ordered Citadel defense to shoot him down, but C-Sec headquarters countermanded my order. They were worried about the hostages. Worried about civilian casualties if the ship was destroyed so close to the Citadel. I told them those hostages were dead anyway. He'd just use them to make more organs. But they wouldn't listen."

The civilian casualty thing was an actual issue, though it sounded suspect. The Citadel had shields. More likely somebody didn't want to fill out the paperwork. "I hate it when civilians get mixed up in it, but sometimes..." He shook his head. "You have to take the shot."

"Letting him get away like that..." Garrus sighed. "All they had to do was disable that ship. Stop him from running. Maybe the hostages die, maybe they don't. But at least we stop the bastard responsible for it all."

"That kind of math was never my favorite subject, but a few causalities is a small price to pay to stop someone like that. If you have to kill five to save a hundred, you do it. You get drunk after, but you do it."

"Yeah. Exactly. I mean, those hostages might be wishing they'd died by now anyway." Garrus started putting his tools away. "I just wished I could have stopped him. That's all."

"Any idea what happened to him?"

"I sent out feelers from time to time, hoping to find something. I thought I'd found him a while back. He'd changed ships and changed his name to Dr. Heart - his idea of a joke, I guess. I told the military, but they weren't convinced it was him. I got the transponder frequency for his new ship, but I just can't get anyone to check it out."

"Upload the data. No promises, but we're running all over the damn place. We happen to cross paths, well..." Michael finished putting in the stabilizer, and set the rifle against his shoulder. It fit perfectly. "Who knows what might happen?"

"I was hoping you'd say that. But Commander, take me with you when you go. If it is Saleon, I want to be there when you find him."

"Garrus..." Michael leaned back and stared at the other man. "You know I'd never poach your kill. Unless of course..." He gave Garrus a challenging look. "You missed."

#

"So these biotic extremists..." Michael glanced over his shoulder at Kaidan.

"There are several groups. Some have legit concerns..." Kaidan looked over the information. "These ones are just your run of the mill malcontents."

"They just happen to glow blue when spouting off." Michael nodded. "Alright, people. Take this one careful. Check your targets and if you have any doubts, stun. Saving the civilians is part of the objective here."

#

"I didn't think it could be done." Hackett looked at him from the other side of the screen. "You managed to secure the base and neutralize the biotics without a single civilian casualty."

"That was the mission, sir." Michael nodded.

"Every now and then, you remind me why I didn't throw your ass in jail." Hackett chuckled. He shook his head, and then his face became serious. "The Spectre thing..."

"We are heading to Feros next. Still playing catch-up but closing." Michael folded his arms. "I've got a hell of a crew here."

"Good." Hackett nodded.

He hesitated a moment. "Finch is dead."

"You?"

"No." He shrugged. "Reds went hate group. Weisman messed with a medical shipment to turians and got caught. Finch tried to sucker me into bailing him out. When that didn't work, he tried blackmail." Michael shook his head. "And when that didn't work, he tried to threaten the guard on his own. I'd already tipped the guard off and he had backup waiting. Finch and his enforcers got dead."

"Understood." Hackett took a deep breath. "You good with the outcome?"

"Finch made his own choices." Michael rolled the coin through his fingers. "I made mine." He shrugged. "Well, with a bit of help from this one old geezer."

"I've got some shore leave coming." Hackett narrowed his eyes, but his lips twitched. "You finish playing around with Saren, and then meet me at Pinnacle Station. I think it's about time for your yearly ass-kicking."

"And what would it do to Alliance morale to see the leader of the Fifth Fleet get humiliated in the ring?"

"Get back to work son. You've still got a job to do."

"Yes, sir."

#

"Hey, skipper. Any interest in a small drink? It's a special occasion."

"Gunny, that looks like contraband." Michael raised an eyebrow.

"Does that mean you're going to confiscate a glass?" She held out a shot.

"Maybe two." He accepted the drink. "What's the occasion?"

"It's Armistice day. When the First Contact War ended. My family always marks it." She shrugged. "Since I'm the only Williams on board, I thought I'd ask you."

He took a sip, and gave the glass an appreciative look. "Seems like an odd thing to celebrate. That was twenty-six years ago."

"In our family, it's not really a celebration. More like an obligation." She raised an eyebrow. "Don't tell me you don't know about my family. My commanders always find out. It's not in my files or something?"

He was the last person that got to judge people by who they had as relatives. "Ashley, I don't give a shit if you're the long lost

heiress of Australia. I care that you know which direction to throw the grenades."

"Not at you."

"Exactly."

She smiled, and it faded after a moment. "I'm General Williams' granddaughter. The commander of the Shanxi garrison in the War." She spread her hands. "The only human ever to surrender to an alien race." She sighed.

His father had ranted about that. Traitor to the species, firing squad, whole bit. "Don't tell me you're blamed for that."

"Not formally. Dad got passed for promotion over and over. And I think my record merits more than garrison duty on a backwater agri colony." She squared her shoulders. "It takes a special kind of thickheaded to march into a job where your family's blacklisted. I did it anyway. I'm not going to let our name go down with Arnold and Quisling. Granddad deserved better than that."

"I slept through half the history classes I attended, but seems to me he made the right decision." Michael handed her back the empty glass.

She shrugged, and refilled it before handing it back. "You've never mentioned. You have any siblings?"

He hesitated a moment. "Almost."

"Almost?" She blinked.

"Had an uncle out on a colony. Standard package. Wife, house, picket fence, three kids. I was going to be shipped out to live with him, we exchanged a few letters. Seemed like nice folks."

"What happened?" She leaned back.

"The colony was Mindoir."

"I..." Her eyes widened slightly. "Oh."

"Jezebel, Brenda, and Samuel. Jezebel and I actually had the same birthday. It was the same day the attack happened." He shrugged. "So, no. No family."

"I'm sorry."

"Life goes on." He waved a hand. "I'm a marine. You walk into the fire with strangers, and you walk back out with family."

She held up the glass. "Now that, I'll drink to."

#

Feros was not a pretty planet. The surface was covered in prothean ruins, surprisingly well preserved. He decided to bring Liara along, and not just because Kaidan was being rather solicitous of the asari.

A man met them as they disembarked. "We saw your ship. Fai Dan wants to speak with you immediately."

That was really never a good thing. "What's so important he needs to see me right away?"

"The geth are making another push. Fai Dan is preparing our defenses, but he needs your help." He pointed. "Please. Up the stairs past the freighter."

Michael turned towards his crew. "I have a hunch this might be the place." He switched on his communication unit. "Williams, Tali, suit up."

#

An older man smiled warmly as Michael approached. "Oh, Commander. I'm glad they finally sent someone to help us."

The woman next to him, on the other hand, looked rather angry. "You're a bit late, aren't you?"

"Arcelia." Fai Dan turned towards the woman. He looked back at Michael. "Sorry, Commander. Everyone's on edge since -" He blinked.

"Watch out." Arcelia ducked back and hefted her rifle. "We've got geth in the tower."

"Protect the heart of the colony." Fai Dan yelled as he took up a defensive position.

"Wrex, Williams, Liara hold this position." Michael unslung his rifle. "And Ash, when I get back I don't want to hear any shit about a Williams girl getting outshot by some mere krogan."

"Yes sir." She grinned as she found herself a good position.

He led the others into the tower to start the fun work of clearing an enemy out of a defensive position.

#

Kaidan checked out Tali's injury first, and was relieved to see the shot hadn't penetrated the new armor plating upgrade Shepard had insisted upon. Her own suit was capable of treating the minor bruising she'd received. Garrus had a couple small abrasions where chips off a wall had struck him. Shepard had some ringing eardrums and a brief lecture for Tali on being overenthusiastic with the flashbangs. Medigel took care of the former problem.

Shepard nodded. "Tali, do a quick scan, see if you can learn anything about what they might be doing here."

"I think these ones are in too many pieces." Tali ran her omnitool over the most intact of the geth. "I've got a signal location, but not much else. It's probably the main encampment."

"Well, we've cleared this area, at least." Garrus looked

around.

"That should keep Fai Dan and the others safe." Kaidan nodded. "After an update we can head out for the main encampment."

"Garrus, you did remember to bring tungsten ammo, right?"

"Tungsten, incendiary, high impact, and phasic."

"Phasic?" Michael stared at him. "In a sniper rifle?"

"With the increased range of the Devlon -"

"You and your Devlon."

Kaidan sighed. "I'm heading back to the encampment now."

"Me too." Tali hurried to fall into step beside him.

#

"The tower's secure. Thanks to you, Commander." Fai Dan smiled.

"It's what we do." Michael nodded to him.

"Well, I'm glad you're on our side, then." Fai Dan took a look around. Kaidan had walked over to where Liara was tending to some of the wounded.

Arcelia sighed. "They may have been slowed, but they'll be back. They always come back."

"Tell me what the geth want." He looked around the encampment. Low tech. Barely even functional tech. Nothing leapt out as welcome sign for the geth. "Why are they attacking you?"

"If you want answers, go ask them yourselves." Arcelia shook her head in frustration.

Fai Dan put his hand on her shoulder. "We don't know what they're after. They came, they attacked us. That's all we know." He sighed. "Their main base is at the ExoGeni headquarters. A good place to start looking if you want answers."

A quick check with Tali confirmed that the ExoGeni headquarters coincided with her signal location. Fai Dan went over the difficulties the colony was experiencing. And Kaidan and Liara were starting to get puppy-eyed. It did make some sense to have a fall-back point. "Tali, check out the power and water problems, see if you can jury-rig something."

"Yes, Commander." She headed in the direction Fai Dan indicated. "Williams, Wrex, hold this location." He left Kaidan and Liara with the medics and gestured for Garrus to follow him to see what kind of food problem they had.

#

Tali's report was somewhat less optimistic than he'd hoped. It didn't

take him long to realized that they were heading into the tunnels. He left Garrus, Ashley, and Liara to hold the point and headed down into the tunnel.

He shook his head as he watched Wrex and Tali. The tiny quarian and the massive krogan made a surprisingly effective team with their shotguns. Wrex managed to work in a lecture on proper grenade usage while blasting varren.

"Aha." Tali looked down at her scanner. "Commander, these power cells. They'll work for the colonists with only minor rigging."

"Note the location. You found that jammer yet?" He raised an eyebrow.

"We are getting close."

"Good." He glanced over. "Kaidan, how are you coming with that water?"

"Looks like we need to switch it on in a couple more places."

"Right." Michael sighed. "Cause it can't just be easy. Big red button and make everything work."

"Shepard..." Wrex glanced at him. "Is there any way you pushing a big red button wouldn't make everything explode?"

"That..." Michael shook his head. "Is a tragically good point."

#

"You don't want to go down there." The man shook his head.

"Um..." Michael glanced over his shoulder at his team, and then shrugged. "What's back there?"

"I could tell you. Tell you everything. How would you like that?" The man glared defiantly, then gasped in pain and fell to one knee. "Nooooo."

Michael drew his sidearm before gesturing to Kaidan. Kaidan pulled out his medical scanner. Slowly, the man got back to his feet. "That was a good one. Very intense."

"What's the matter with you?" Michael tilted his head. He kept the sidearm ready, but didn't point it at the man yet.

"Just invoking the master's whip. Helps remind me I'm still alive." The man grinned. "You're here for the geth, aren't you? You're not the only one interested in those..." He waved a hand. "Things."

Alright. He'd play asking questions of the crazy. "Who else is looking for the geth?"

"Not looking for; looking to get rid of. They're a thorn in the side

of the -" The man's face contorted in pain. Kaidan stared at his medical scanner, then shook his head in confusion. "Trying to get to the -" The man cried out again, then started laughing.

Kaidan applied a dose of something, then stepped away. "He's lost it. We should just leave him be."

"Right." Michael nodded. "We don't really have time for this anyway."

"Well, don't stay too long, or time will be all you haaaaaaave-" The man yelped again.

#

Kaidan glanced back over his shoulder, then looked down at the scanner. According to the readings, there was absolutely nothing wrong with the man. He turned back to Shepard, who was raising an eyebrow at him. "I've got nothing, Commander."

"Alright." Shepard nodded. "Let's finish getting that water on, and head..." He sighed and then glanced back up to Tali and Wrex. And where Tali was hurling geth pieces for Wrex to shoot. "You know, I'm not really sure anymore which one of them is the bad influence on the other."

"Something about that seems..." Kaidan glanced down at the remains of a geth. "Like it should be wrong."

"Yeah, the part where they are making noise and wasting ammo." Shepard whistled shrilly, and gestured for Wrex and Tali to join them in heading back out of the tunnels.

12. Chapter 12

Kaidan just shook his head as Shepard hacked the lock on the mako's hatch. It was a little disturbing just how easily he did it. Which left Kaidan wondering if it was skill on Shepard's part, or if security on a mobile missile launcher was really that poor. He really hoped it was the former. "You know, you could have asked to borrow the mako."

"But then they could have said no." Shepard shrugged. "Get on the scanner, let us know what we're getting into."

"I'll drive..." Garrus started to climb up to the hatch.

"The hell you do." Shepard shook his head.

"You can't man the guns and drive at the same time, Shepard." Garrus gave him a challenging look.

"That a bet, Vakarian?" Shepard returned it with one of his own.

"Not everything has to be a competition." Kaidan shook his head.

They both turned to stare at him with looks that suggested that was

completely news to them. He sighed, and got into the mako.

#

Crackling over the radio revealed there were survivors somewhere. Michael gestured for people to be wary as they headed in to investigate. The refugees they found immediately started panicking. Well, most of them. A woman gave the guy who looked to be in charge an annoyed look. "Relax, Jeong. They're obviously not geth."

"Get back, Juliana." The man glared at them. "Who are you? What do you want?"

Michael rolled his eyes. "Commander Shepard. I'm here to remove your geth problem."

"You see?" The woman, Juliana, folded her arms. "You worry too much."

"And you trust to easily, Juliana." Jeong turned his glare to her.

"I'm just glad to see a friendly face." Juliana nodded to him. "I thought we were the only humans left on this planet."

There was an undercurrent here he didn't quite like. "Fai Dan and some members of Zhu's Hope are still alive."

Juliana immediately whirled on Jeong. "I thought you said they were all dead."

"I said they were 'probably' all dead," Jeong replied weakly.

"They're still alive." Kaidan spoke up from behind Michael. "But the geth hit them pretty hard."

"We know what that's like. Those damn synthetics are relentless."

"Just tell me where I can find them." Michael looked around. Not a lot of survivors, but still more than he'd expected to find. If they'd gone to Zhu's Hope and combined forces, they'd all have been in a lot better shape.

"You see?" Jeong glared. "They're not here to save us. We should just wait for company support before we -"

"Ignore him." Juliana shook her head. "The geth are up in the ExoGeni headquarters. Just a bit further along the skyway."

Jeong turned towards him and actually pointed a finger. "Those headquarters are private property, soldier. Remove the geth and nothing else."

"I'm not interested in your company secrets." Though if he did find himself in Jeong's office, he was definitely going to help himself to something. On principle. And carve his name in the asshole's desk. He started to turn to head back to the mako.

"Commander, before you go..." Juliana held up a hand. "My daughter, Lizbeth. She's missing..."

"They shouldn't waste time poking around." Jeong waved a hand. "We can do a proper accounting of our casualties after the geth are gone." On second thought, maybe he'd 'accidentally' drop a grenade in the guy's office.

"That's my daughter you're talking about. She's still alive. I know it."

He got what information Juliana had, and promised he'd keep an eye out. Under the circumstances, he really didn't want to give her false hope.

#

Before they could leave, yet another person asked for help. This one wanted information off his computer, but was afraid it was too dangerous for him or one of his friends to go back for it.

Kaidan just shook his head as they walked away. "Well, that's very comforting. Certain death for some, fine for us."

Garrus nodded. "Why do people always assume we enjoy putting ourselves in harm's way?"

"Maybe they've met us before?" Shepard glanced back at them and raised an eyebrow.

A smile came to Kaidan's face. It was possible the commander had a point.

#

"Four geth, one missile." Garrus made noise that sounded more like a cackle than a laugh. "Beat that."

"It was the little infantry ones." Michael shook his head. "I can't believe you're even bothering to brag about that. It's like saying 'hey, I stepped on four ants.'"

"What's an ant?" Garrus glanced at him before turning back to the guns and firing another shot.

"Minuscule earth insect that swarms. Watch the colossus."

"I see it, keep the Mako steady."

"You did notice it's shooting at us, right Vakarian?"

#

The shot missed all of them by at least a foot. Michael aimed his sidearm and was about to fire when he realized the other shooter was a human woman. "Damn it." She stared at them. "I'm so sorry. I thought you were geth, or one of those varren." She let the gun fall to her side.

Michael lowered his sidearm. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

And she turned out to be Lizbeth, Juliana's daughter. "It's my own fault. Everyone else was running and I stayed to back up data." She gestured. "Next thing I knew, the geth ship latched on and the power went out. I was trapped. I tried to get out, but the way was blocked."

"We'll clear the geth soon enough." Michael nodded to her.

"It's not the geth." She shook her head. "It's the energy field they put up. They don't want anyone else getting access to the -" She cut herself off.

At last. The plot thinned. "I'm here for the geth. If you know something, tell me."

She hesitated, and then nodded. "I don't know for certain, but I'm guessing they're here for the Thorian."

"Thorian?" They exchanged looks with each other before turning back to her.

Lizbeth explained that it was an indigenous life-form ExoGeni was studying and said she could tell them more when they were safe. He thought she might be a little worried that if she answered all their questions, they'd leave her behind. Kaidan would likely be upset if he tried. She gave them her ID for any locked doors they encountered, and went to find a good hiding place.

#

To absolutely no one's surprise, it turned out krogan mercenaries didn't rank among the world's best hackers. He got a little bit of information from the VI after dealing with the krogan, but it raised more questions than it answered.

They followed the power cables and found...

"What is this place?" Kaidan looked around. "Almost looks like the geth built themselves some kind of church."

Michael nodded. It was strangely disturbing. He examined the claw the geth ship had used to latch on to the building. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but I don't think we have enough ordnance to deal with this."

"I'll mark this day on the calendar." Kaidan nodded.

"What if we put grenades in the joints?" Garrus looked over the claw.

"No." Michael shook his head. "We'd need at least eight high-explosives to even have a chance. The flashbangs and the gas won't even scratch the paint." He shook his head. "It's a lab. Let's look around, we might be able to find or rig something."

#

Kaidan shook his head. "Found the weapons locker, but there's barely anything larger than a pistol. No grenades." He looked at where Shepard was examining the door controls. "Commander?"

"I think I've found a pretty big safety violation." Shepard started touching controls. "I'm going to have to add it to my report." He hit the last control, and suddenly the blast door came down, shearing through one of the claws. There were creaking and crashing sounds as the other claws tore free and the geth ship started to fall away from the building.

"Commander..." Kaidan starred.

Garrus let out a laugh. "That certainly did look unsafe."

"I know." Shepard shook his head. "Can you imagine? Someone could get hurt."

"All right." Kaidan shrugged. "The door out will be open now. We can head back and deal with this Thorian thing."

#

They had only gone a few steps when the communications started working again. Joker's voice came over. "I repeat, Normandy to shore party. Are you reading? Anyone there? Normandy to shore party. Come on, Commander, talk to me."

"Is that you, Joker? What's going on over there?"

"We're in lockdown here, Commander. Something happened to the colonists. They're banging on the hull, trying to claw their way inside the ship. They're freaking out."

"They can't do any real damage." The Normandy could take anything the colonists had left and laugh it off. "We're on our way back. Just hold your position."

"Uh..." Joker's voice came back over. "Yeah. Okay. Well, we'll just wait right here for you, Commander."

#

Lizbeth was waiting for them when they got out. "There you are." She waved. "We should get out of here. I don't think this place is safe."

Oh, it most certainly was not. But mostly for her. "You said you didn't know about the Thorian." He narrowed his eyes. "I don't like being lied to."

"I-" She visibly paled. "I was afraid. I wanted to stop the tests, but they threatened me, told me I'd be next. When the geth attacked, I stayed behind to send a message to Colonial Affairs. I tried to tell them where to find the Thorian, but the power cut before I could send the message. I..." She looked down. "I never meant for this to happen."

Michael shook his head. "Where's the Thorian?"

"The Thorian is underneath Zhu's Hope, but the entrance is blocked." She gestured. "The colonists covered it with the freighter just before the geth attacked."

"But why are the geth after the Thorian?" Michael frowned. "What could Saren want with it?" And why were the colonists apparently protecting it?

"Well, it does have unique mind-control capabilities. That's what ExoGeni was interested in."

He starred at her for a moment. Joker's voice over the comm saved him from having to find a wall to beat his head against. "Normandy to shore party. Come in."

"What is it, Joker?"

"We're getting a lot of geth comm chatter. Looks like they're headed your way."

He shrugged. "I guess wrecking their ship drew a bit of attention." He shook his head at Lizbeth, but gestured for her to follow. "Let's move out."

"I might be able to help." She fell into step behind him. "Undo the mess I helped create."

#

As soon as the voices came over the comm, Lizbeth stood and popped open the hatch. "That's my mom. Stop. Stop the rover." She started climbing out.

Michael hit the brakes. He debated just continuing on, but Kaidan was climbing out after the woman. "Oh for..." He sighed, and followed.

#

To his complete lack of surprise, Jeong was still being stupid. Only this time, he was armed and stupid. "Everyone shut up. Let me think." Armed, stupid, and melodramatic. Should really be a law or two against that.

"What's going on?" Lizbeth hissed at Michael. Michael just glared at her.

"You won't get away with this." Juliana was shaking her head.

"Get her out of here." Jeong gestured, and one of the guards grabbed Juliana.

"Get away from her, you son of a bitch." And then Lizbeth was standing up and heading down there. Unarmed, and stupid. Maybe they should have put a leash on her.

"Lizbeth." Juliana ran towards her.

"Damn it." Jeong glared. "Come out where I can see you. All of you." Michael shrugged, and walked out, flanked by Kaidan and Garrus. "Hah,

Shepard. Damn it. I knew it was too much to hope the geth would kill you." Jeong shook his head. "I found some interesting facts about you in the ExoGeni database. I know what you did on Torfan. There's no reason for this to get bloody."

That was rapidly becoming untrue. "Not this time, Jeong. You need to back down and let them go."

"You don't understand. It's not that easy." Jeong waved a hand. "Communications are back up. ExoGeni wants this place purged."

"This is a human colony, Jeong." Lizbeth shook her head. "You can't just re-purpose us."

"It's not just you." Jeong actually sounded like he thought he was being reasonable. "There's something here far more valuable than a few colonists."

It's like the man was just begging to have all of his teeth shattered. "Are you going to tell them about the Thorian, or should I?"

"The what?" Juliana blinked.

Lizbeth sighed. "It's a telepathic life-form living under Zhu's Hope. It's taking control of the colonists there. ExoGeni knew all along."

"You won't get away with this, Jeong." Juliana glared.

Jeong shrugged. "So you keep saying. But nobody's going to miss a few colonists."

He really should make a bingo card for situations like these. This was getting boring. Michael decided to point out the obvious. "You're a bean-counter, Jeong. I'm a Spectre. Tell me, how good are those odds?"

"A Spectre? That's a load of crap. There aren't any human Spectres." Jeong swallowed. "Right?" For the love of... The guy could look up Torfan, and not that? He needed to have a chat with ExoGeni about their hiring practices. And a few other things.

"Is that really a chance you're willing to take, Jeong?" Lizbeth smiled.

"ExoGeni will send more assayers." Jeong was starting to look desperate. "They'll know what happened."

"Tell them the geth destroyed the Thorian." Michael shrugged. Shooting this guy was starting to sound more like mercy kill than execution.

"Yeah, but the infected colonists can't be here when the company men come." Jeong shook his head.

"You can't just kill the colonists. It's not their fault." Juliana clenched her fists.

Lizbeth turned towards him. "If you kill only the Thorian, it might

be enough to stop the infection. Maybe."

He turned towards her, and caught the look on Kaidan's face. Michael took a deep breath. "It's worth a try, but I don't know if I can avoid harming the colonists." Those scientists the biotics had poisoned had just wandered around. From the sound of things, the colonists were actively fighting.

"There has to be another way." Lizbeth sighed.

"Maybe there is." Juliana nodded. "Come and talk to me before you leave, Commander." She started to walk to a lab bench.

Michael gestured for Kaidan to follow her. If there was a way, Kaidan's medical training made him the most suited to figure it out. Michael turned back to Jeong. The man actually tried to sound threatening. "Just make sure there's no evidence when you're done."

"Garrus..." Michael glanced over his shoulder. "You were with C-Sec. Would Jeong here be considered evidence?"

"I'd consider him exhibit A, actually." Garrus nodded. "He'd last about thirty seconds in interrogation."

Jeong's eyes started to widen.

#

Kaidan fitted the gas cylinder into the concussion grenade, and glanced over his shoulder at Shepard. He couldn't make out what he and Garrus were saying to Jeong, but the guy was starting to turn a mottled green and looked ready to wet himself. "What's the safe distance for this nerve gas?"

"I doubt it will affect you at all. There are only trace amounts of Tetraclopine, a neuromuscular degenerator. Since their immune systems are already weakened, it may act as a paralyzing agent."

"It's worth a shot." Kaidan nodded. He looked down at the grenades, and signed. "Exactly six shots." Well, with his biotics added to the mix as well as the skills of Shepard and Garrus, maybe that was enough.

"Good luck." Lizbeth nodded, and gave him a weak smile.

#

The thing that attacked them was... Michael stared at it. What the fuck was the thing that attacked them?

"What is that?" Kaidan ran his scanner over it. "There's no way that's human, infection or not."

"Alright." Michael nodded. "The colonists are going to be shooting at us, which is going to make this fun. Check your targets. Shooting these things good, shooting colonists bad. Our objective is as few fatalities as possible." He frowned, and then split the grenades between himself and Garrus. "Gas grenades and biotics." He sighed. "And in a pinch, there's always a rifle butt to the face, but let's

try to leave that as the second to last resort."

Kaidan gave a small smile. "You got it, Commander. Let's do this."

#

The gas took out all the shooters except Arcelia. She came up, her rifle aimed at Garrus's back. With a sigh, Michael moved in, grabbing her arm and lifting the rifle up so the shot missed Garrus by several feet. He brought the top of his head down on the bridge of her nose, sending her to the ground. Blood gushed from her face, but she was out of the fight. He sighed. If she hadn't been so rude to them earlier, he'd have felt really bad about that. He shrugged, and headed back into the fray.

#

He told Kaidan to make sure the colonists were both alright and going to stay unconscious for long enough for them to figure out what a Thorian was. And then kill it.

Hacking the lock to move the freighter didn't take long. Michael was starting to head in when he heard Fai Dan's voice. "I tried to fight it, but it gets in your head. You can't imagine the pain." The man had a gun in his hand as he staggered towards them. And they were out of grenades. "I was supposed to be a leader. These people trusted me." He lifted the gun. Reluctantly, Michael did the same. "It wants me to stop you..." Fai Dan shook his head. "But I..." The gun shook. "I won't." Fai Dan shifted his aim. "I won't."

The man pulled the trigger. And took his own life. Michael sighed.

#

"Okay, but the numbers. We just need to find..." Kaidan nearly ran into Shepard as the man came to an abrupt stop. "To find..." His gaze went to whatever Shepard was staring at. "What..." He stared. "Is that?" It was massive, possibly larger than the Normandy.

Shepard sighed. "Nothing's ever simple, is it?"

Slowly, Shepard started to move forward, gesturing for him and Garrus to stay put. He took a deep breath, prepared to put up a barrier and haul Shepard out biotically if needed. Liquid started to drop from the thing's tentacled... mouth? And then an asari slide out of... Okay. There was a chance he was going to have at least one nightmare about that.

"Invaders. Your every step is a transgression. A thousand feelers appraise you as meat, good only to dig or decompose." The green asari stared at them. "I speak for the Old Growth, as I did for Saren. You are within and before the Thorian. It commands that you be in awe."

"You gave something to Saren." Shepard nodded. "Something I need."

"Saren sought knowledge of those who are gone. The Old Growth

listened to flesh for the first time in the Long Cycle. Trades were made. Then cold ones began killing the flesh that would tend the next cycle. Flesh fairly given. The Old Growth sees the air you push as lies. It will listen no more."

"Give me what I need and I'll strike back at the one who betrayed you."

"No more will the Thorian listen to those that scurry. Your lives are short, but have gone on too long." She attacked.

#

"You know what I wish we had right now?" Michael glanced at Garrus.

"More grenades?" Garrus fired at one of the creepy psuedo-asari.

"I was going to say a lawn mower." Michael nodded, and shot one of the strange human-shaped fungal things. "But I think you're onto something with this 'more grenades' idea."

#

"There's another one of those nodes. Garrus, hit it." Michael had to punch one of the fungus-people. There were just so many of the damn things, and they swarmed from all directions.

Kaidan glowed blue, and used his biotics to throw a half dozen of them off the ledge. Michael moved in to provide him cover fire, and some benefit from his kinetic shield while he recovered. The Thorian made a roaring sound as Garrus sniped another node. Michael and Kaidan stayed back to back, keeping the fungal-things from getting to the turian as he focused on the Thorian itself. "Almost there, Commander," Kaidan said. "That thing has to drop soon."

"Hopefully before we do." Shepard grabbed one of the fungal things and threw it at where one of the psuedo-asari was starting to glow. It hit her, knocking her back. He then shot her before she could get her biotics going again. One of the fungal things closed, forcing him to resort once more to hand to hand. Ah well, it was good practice for meeting up with Hackett later.

#

As another node was blasted apart, the Thorian started to shudder. Then it started collapsing in on itself. The remaining nodes pulled free as it fell, shaking the entire structure. For a moment, Michael was worried the entire place was going to go down with it. With a final rather horrifying sound, the Thorian was gone.

Michael was just about to make some sort of witty clever remark, when a pustule on the wall started to move. And an asari fell out of it. He went with a curse instead, and nearly fired a shot before realizing this particular asari was blue.

Slowly, she got to her feet, and began looking around her. "I'm free." She smiled. "I'm free. I -" She seemed to notice them for the first time. "I suppose I should thank you for releasing me."

Maybe. "How did you end up inside that..." He glanced at it before looking back at her. "Thing?"

"My name is Shiala. I serve -" She shook her head. "I served Matriarch Benezia. When she allied herself with Saren, so did I." Past tense was definitely appropriate. "Benezia foresaw the influence Saren would have. She joined him to guide him down a gentler path. But Saren is compelling, Benezia lost her way."

"Are you saying Saren can control minds?" Hadn't Benezia implied something similar?

"Benezia underestimated Saren. As I did. We came to believe in his cause and his goals. The strength of his influence is troubling."

"Asari Matriarchs are among the most intelligent and powerful beings in the galaxy." Or so they liked to claim. He was starting to have his doubts. "How could one fall under Saren's control?"

"Saren has a vessel. An enormous warship unlike anything I've ever seen. He calls it Sovereign. It can dominate the minds of his followers. They become indoctrinated to Saren's will. The process is subtle. It can take days, weeks. But in the end, it is absolute. I was a willing slave when Saren brought me to this world. He needed me to communicate with the Thorian, to learn its secrets. Saren offered me in trade. I was sacrificed to secure an alliance between Saren and the Thorian."

And they'd suggested he was an evil boss for wanting to space the rat-monkey. "Then why were the geth trying to destroy the Thorian?"

She shrugged. "After Saren had what he needed, the Thorian became a liability." She nodded to him. "Saren knows you are searching for the Conduit. He knows you are following his steps. He attacked the Thorian so you could not gain the Cipher."

Maybe this mission wasn't a waste of time after all. "What's the Cipher? And why did Saren need it?"

"The beacon on Eden Prime gave you visions. But the visions are unclear, confusing. They were meant for a Prothean mind." She spread her hands. "To truly comprehend them, you must think like a Prothean. You must understand their culture, their history, their very existence." She lifted a hand. "The Thorian was here long before the Protheans built this city. It watched and studied them. When they died, it consumed them. They became a part of it."

And now his head was starting to hurt. "Just give me some plain answers. Where is the Cipher?"

"The Cipher is the very essence of being a Prothean. It cannot be described or explained. It would be like describing color to a creature without eyes. To understand, you must have access to endemic ancestral memory. A viewpoint spanning thousands of Prothean generations. I sensed this ancestral memory - the Cipher - when I melded with the Thorian. Our identities merged, our minds intertwined. Such knowledge cannot be taught; it simply exists."

"You taught Saren." He narrowed his eyes. "You can teach me."

"There is a way. I can transfer the knowledge from my mind to yours, as I did with Saren." Oh, this sounded very much like something he was really going to regret. But he nodded. "Try to relax, Commander. Slow, deep breaths. Let go of your physical shell. Reach out to grasp the threads that bind us, one to another." Shiala began to approach him. "Every action sends ripples across the galaxy. Every idea must touch another mind to live. Each emotion must mark another's spirit. We are all connect. Every living being united in a single, glorious existence. Open yourself to the universe, Commander." Her eyes went black. "Embrace eternity."

#

Images floated in his mind. Some vaguely recognizable. Others dancing tantalizingly out of reach. The screech of metal on metal. Noise and knowledge, too fast for him to be able to grab any long enough for them to make any damn sense. For a moment, he simply drifted in space, looking across the universe at... something.

When he opened his eyes again, Shiala was looking back at him. Her face mirrored his own confusion. She nodded. "I have given you the Cipher, just as it was given to Saren. The ancestral memories of the Protoheans are a part of you now."

Kaidan's hand touched his shoulder, and then the man was running the medical scanner over him. "What just happened? Are you okay?"

"I saw..." He needed to redefine the term 'okay'. "Something. It still didn't make any sense."

"You have been given a great gift: the experience of an entire people. It will take time for your mind to process this information."

"You look pretty rough." Kaidan put the scanner away and gave him a worried look. "We should get you back to the ship." Right. Liara really was going to want to dissect him now.

Shiala sighed. "I am sorry if you have suffered, but there was no other way. You needed the Cipher. In time, it will help you understand the vision from the beacon."

Michael looked at her. "And you?"

She swallowed. "If you allow it, I would like to stay here with the colonists. They have suffered greatly, and I played a role in their suffering. I would like to make amends."

He shook his head. She was dangerous, but he wasn't sure she was actually a threat. Kaidan looked from Shiala to Michael, concern in his eyes. Michael nodded. "The colonists will need help. They could use you."

"Thank you, Commander. May fortune smile upon you."

#

He made it out of the Thorian's chamber on his own legs, but it was close at a couple points. Kaidan never got more than a couple feet from him. Any other day, he'd probably have found that irritating.

The colonists were recovering. Juliana and Lizbeth were tending to them. Arcelia didn't seem to be holding a grudge over the broken nose, but she was pretty upset about Fai Dan. He really couldn't blame her.

"Let's head back to the Normandy." Michael gestured.

"Right." Garrus nodded. "Can't have you falling down in front of all these people."

"Kaidan, when we get back, have Dr. Chakwas give Vakarian a full exam." Micheal waved a hand. "He's under the delusion he's funny."

13. Chapter 13

Shepard made it to the ramp of the Normandy before stumbling. Kaidan caught him before he fell, and got a shoulder up under him. "Dr. Chakwas should have a look at you."

"She's going to lecture me about meeting up with strange women on strange planets." Shepard winced.

"I think she might be more concerned about the giant alien plant monster, sir."

"Have you met Dr. Chakwas?" Shepard glanced at him.

"Liara will want to take a look at you as well." Kaidan shook his head and half-carried Shepard into the ship. "Prothean cipher? I bet she can't wait to get her hands on you." He sighed when Shepard snickered. "I didn't mean it like that."

"Jealous, Alenko?" Shepard's voice was tight, despite the smile on his face. "Just remember that I saw her first."

He tried to keep his own worry out of his voice. "Only by a few seconds, sir."

#

"Commander? You look..." Liara gave him a concerned look. "Are you suffering any ill effects from the Cipher?"

"I feel like my brain's been scrambled like an egg." Michael sighed.

"I might be able to help you. I am an expert on the Protheans. If I join my consciousness to yours maybe we can make some sense of it."

The number of women wanting into his head these days was a little disturbing. "Do it. Hurry. We don't have much time." He stood, very much hoping he was not going to regret this. Much.

"Relax, Commander." Liara approached him. "Embrace eternity."

Once again images flooded into his head. They didn't appear to make much more sense than last time.

Liara actually staggered backwards a moment or however much time had passed later. "That was incredible. All this time. All my research. Yet I never dreamed..." She shook her head. "I'm sorry. The images were so vivid. I never imagined the experience would be so..." She swallowed. "Intense. You are remarkably strong-willed, Commander. What you've been through, what you've seen, would have destroyed a lesser mind."

One advantage of already being insane was nothing could drive you that way. Ashley leaned forward. "Come on. Get to the point. What did you see?"

"The beacon on Eden Prime must have been badly damaged. Large parts of the vision are missing. The data transferred into the commander's mind is incomplete."

If he had this headache for nothing, someone or something was getting spaced. "You sure you didn't come across any kind of clue or hint? Something we might have missed?"

"Everything I saw you already know. You were right about the Reapers. The Protheans were destroyed by a race of sentient machines." She frowned, and touched her chin. "I think it's obvious there's a connection between the Reapers, the Prothean extinction, and the Conduit. But I didn't see anything that would help us find it."

"We need to figure out our next move."

"I was able to interpret the data relayed through your vision. What was there, at least. But something was missing." She tapped her fingers against her chin. "Saren must have the missing information. Maybe he found another beacon. If we can find the missing data from your vision I can -" She swayed slightly. "Whoa." Her hand went to her head. Kaidan was immediately on his feet, medical scanner in hand. "I'm sorry. The joining is..." She sighed. "Exhausting. I should go to the medical bay and lie down for a moment."

Michael nodded to Kaidan, who was giving him a concerned look. "Have Dr. Chakwas take a look at her."

"That won't be necessary. I just need some rest. Somewhere quiet." Liara smiled reassuringly.

He knew that feeling. "We're done here. Dismissed."

#

Joker's voice came over before he could make good his escape. "I've sent off the Feros report, Commander. You want me to patch you through to the Council?"

No. "Patch them through, Joker."

"Setting up the link now, Commander."

At least they didn't leave him waiting long. The asari... shit, he still hadn't learned their names. "Commander, Exogeni should have told us about the Thorian. It would have made your job much easier."

The salarian glared. "You might have been able to capture it for study instead of destroying it."

"Exogeni tried to study it." He clasped his hands behind his back, mostly to stop himself from just hitting the toggle. Diplomacy should at least be attempted. "Look how that turned out."

"Perhaps it's for the best, then." The asari smiled. "At least the colony was saved."

"Of course it was saved." The turian shook his head. "Shepard would go to any lengths to help a human colony." He said that like it was a bad thing.

He hit the toggle. "Goodbye, Councilor."

"Uh-oh. So-" Joker's voice came over the comm again. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, sir. We lost that connection."

"Joker..." Michael rubbed his forehead. "It's possible you and I aren't cut out to be diplomats."

#

"Tali."

"Yes, Commander?" Tali turned towards him.

"I requisitioned you new armor." Michael waved a hand in the direction of the quartermaster. "Get it kitted out to your liking before we get dragged into another mess."

"You..." She tilted her head. "Got me armor?"

"People keep shooting at us. That lightweight stuff you've been wearing isn't going to cut it. Get it kitted out and sized for you, and leave it on the workbench so I can put new plating on." He shook his head. "I don't want any more holes poked in the only other person on this ship that can drive a mako." Garrus made a polite coughing sound. "Something in your throat, Vakarian?"

"No, no..." Garrus shook his head. "Just caught another whiff of crap there."

#

"And you want me to negotiate with this warlord?" Michael stared at Hackett.

"We're hoping your position will enable you to talk him down. A show of strength and respect." Hackett nodded to him.

"Alright." Michael shrugged.

#

"I'd hoped the Alliance would take this meeting seriously." The man up on the landing waved a hand dramatically. "Instead, they insult me by sending a military grunt to show me how tough they -"

Kaidan blinked when Shepard shot the guy in the head. And then casually replaced his sidearm. "Um..." He glanced at the body that tumbled down and hit the ground with something between a thud and a splat. "Sir..." He looked back at Shepard. "Weren't you supposed to negotiate?"

Shepard shrugged. "Knew I should have looked that word up."

#

Hackett shook his head, but a smile played around the edges of his mouth. "You could have tried to negotiate."

"Sir, if you'd wanted to negotiate with him, you'd have sent a negotiator."

"The Alliance does not condone assassination. We would never give that order. Killing Darius was your decision alone -" Hackett nodded. "And because you're a Spectre, we couldn't reprimand you if we wanted to."

"Good to know, sir."

"Can still kick your ass though." Hackett smiled.

"You and what army?"

"The Fifth Fleet, son."

"I..." Michael shrugged. "Well, maybe."

"Hackett out."

Michael rolled his eyes, then caught a glimpse of Kaidan standing in the door. "You need something?"

"You and Hackett..." Kaidan raised an eyebrow. "Didn't realize you two knew each other."

"He's the one that recruited me." Michael nodded. He looked out at the comm. "Wasn't for him, well..." He shrugged. "Might still be one of the Reds."

"Not..." Kaidan rubbed the back of his neck. "That's kind of a frightening thought, Commander, all things considered."

"Might be right about that." He leaned back in the chair. "Were you at the door for a reason?"

"Just checking up on you." Kaidan shrugged. "Liara was trying to work up the nerve to come look in on you, but was worried that you'd feel like she was wanting to dissect you or something."

"I don't think it's a completely invalid concern." Michael waved a hand. Kaidan and Liara made kind of a cute couple. "She's a nice girl."

"She is." Kaidan smiled.

#

"Commander, are you coming to check up on me?" Liara raised an eyebrow.

"According to Kaidan, you've been trying to decide if you should come check up on me." Michael shrugged. "Thought I'd save you the trouble."

She gave him a warm smile. "Then let us talk about you. Are you okay?"

"Define okay?"

"You need to take care of yourself, Commander. The crew relies on you for leadership. It can be a heavy burden." She looked up at him. "You said I could ask..." She shook her head. "About you." She shrugged.

"Why so curious about me?" Michael raised an eyebrow.

"I want to know more about you. To understand what made you into the man you are. There's something compelling about you, Shepard."

"Yeah. It's the visions of the Protheans."

Liara gave a small laugh. "I admit, your connection to the Protheans had something to do with my initial interest. But it has grown beyond that. You intrigue me, Shepard. But I was not sure if it was appropriate to act on my feelings. I thought there might already be a relationship between you and Chief Williams."

His brain attempted to do a hard reboot. And failed. He tried again. The girl his friend was sweet on had an interest in him and thought he was interested in Ashley. He felt the urge to bang his head against the nearest bulkhead. "I care about Ash, but not..." He shook his head. "Like that." Did Ashley think... Well, he hadn't been shot in nearly a week. He was probably due.

"I see. I feel there may be some attraction between us, Shepard." She smiled up at him.

Damn. If Kaidan wasn't... He really needed to learn more about Asari mating rituals to stop this kind of thing from happening. First the Consort and then... "I'm sorry, Liara. I'm not interested in you that way."

Her face turned several shades of purple. "This is very embarrassing for me, Commander. Please, let's talk about something else."

"Why don't I just..." He glanced over his shoulder. "Pretend this conversation never occurred and..." He sighed. "I'm fine, you're fine, and we are both busy with lots of other things so..." He

shrugged. "I should go?"

"Thank you."

#

"Is this another negotiation?" Garrus glanced at Michael.

"I looked that word up." Michael shrugged. "Apparently, it involves diplomacy."

"And did you look up the word diplomacy?" Garrus's mandibles clicked.

"Sure did." He nodded. "It means bring Kaidan and Liara along." He gestured at the biotics that joined them in the airlock. "Closest thing we have on board to puppies."

"Does he mean that as a compliment?" Liara glanced at Kaidan.

"I didn't hear anything." Kaidan shook his head. "I turned my suit radio off the moment I saw both of them holding sniper rifles."

"How?" Liara started reaching for her helmet.

#

"You see how it is? You write letters and everyone ignores you. Force is the only thing people appreciate." The leader of the biotics had the chairman kneeling in front of him, with a gun pressed to the back of the man's head. "So how about if I kill Chairman Burns and finish this charade?"

"Please!" The kneeling man was all but whimpering. "I was trying to help you people."

"Let's not do anything we're all going to regret." He could take the shot, but if everyone else in the room was a biotic, it could get messy fast. Keeping the chairman alive was going to be an interesting challenge.

"Why not?" The leader shook his head. "What have we got to lose? Since the chairman here decided that we didn't get reparations, we've got nothing left to live for."

"But I've changed my mind." Seeing y-you all, it's c-clear that you all d-deserve..."

"You had your chance. Some L2s are nearly crippled from side effects of the implants, but you voted against reparations."

"If you die fighting, you'll get a lot of biotics killed, as well." Michael narrowed his eyes.

"What do you mean?" The leader of the biotics looked up at him.

"You've just made all L2 biotics look like terrorists." He was going to have to apologize to Kaidan later. "Think of what will happen to

them."

"But people need to hear about what the government has done, and what it has failed to do." The leader waved his free hand.

Kaidan took a step forward. "People have heard. You've already accomplished that. You don't need to die for it."

It took a couple seconds, but it worked. The man lowered the gun. "You're right. I don't want to die. Maybe something will happen this time. We surrender."

#

"Thank you, Commander. I thought I was dead when they took me." The chairman rubbed the back of his head where the gun had been. Kaidan began running a medical scan over him.

"Reopen the reparations discussion." Michael nodded to him.

"I..." Burns nodded. "Yes. I'll see to it the reparations discussion is reopened. I didn't know they were so desperate."

"Then you weren't doing your job." Michael shrugged. "A Fifth Fleet cruiser will pick you and the prisoners up."

#

"I thought that was going to end in a firefight." Kaidan followed Shepard back towards the lockers.

"Couple years ago, it might have." Shepard rubbed the back of his neck. "Didn't know much about biotics until talking with you. Didn't know what some of you have been through, or about the implants. And the biotics I worked with in the past..." He shrugged. "Sadi was kind of a..."

"Linus Sadi?" Kaidan raised an eyebrow, and then shook his head. He's heard a story about... "You're the guy that broke his nose, aren't you?"

"I think the fact that I did not get court martialed for that is rather telling." Shepard leaned against the locker. "Now I'm wondering how much was him being an asshole, and how much was trouble from the implant."

"He..." Kaidan sighed and then nodded. "I'd say about ninety percent was asshole, sir."

"Well, that's comforting." Shepard rolled his eyes. "Working with you and Liara..." He twitched a shoulder. "You're part of my team, not prima donnas I have to baby-sit. Hell, you've carried me back to the ship twice now." He nodded. "And for a researcher, Liara's shaping up to be one hell of a soldier."

He smiled. Watching Shepard and Ashley giving Liara and Tali lessons in hand to hand combat the previous evening had been oddly heart-warming. Ashley had more or less decided Tali was just another little sister, and Liara and the commander looked really good together. "She is." Kaidan glanced at the elevator. "Wrex is a biotic

too."

"Wrex is a damn tank. I wouldn't be surprised if his hump is actually some kind of hidden missile launcher."

Kaidan laughed.

#

Ashley laughed. "She thinks that..." She shook her head. "That you and I are..." She actually snorted. "She really doesn't get out much, does she?"

"I think I'm a little insulted by how amused you are about this." Michael shook his head.

"Sir, if you had the choice between seeing me out of uniform or getting a new modification for your sniper rifle...?"

"What kind of modification?" Michael raised an eyebrow.

"Thank you for proving my point." Ashley snickered.

"Gunny, I just want you to know..." He shrugged. "I would definitely check you out before anything from the Hammer, Avenger, Reaper, Devlon, or Lightning Strike catalogs."

"What about Ariake?"

"Depends on what page of the catalog and what you were..." He winked. "Or weren't wearing under the uniform."

#

"... fires seven shots to every six and doesn't have anywhere near the kickback."

"One more shot isn't that helpful if none of them can get through even the substandard ariake plating."

"Are you two still arguing about sniper rifles?" Tali looked from Garrus to Michael.

"No." Michael shook his head.

She blinked. "Then..."

Ashley lifted her head off the table. "I made the mistake of asking them if I should upgrade my sidearm." She put her head back down on the table. "That was an hour ago."

#

"Dr. Heart, huh?" Michael shook his head as they walked towards the airlock. "I feel like that alone kind of deserves a bullet to the head."

#

"Thank you." The salarian actually smiled. "Thank you for saving me

from those things."

Michael turned towards Garrus and raised an eyebrow. Garrus nodded. "That's him. That's Dr. Saleon."

"What?" The salarian took a step backward. "My name is Heart. Dr. Heart. Please, get me out of here."

"Are you sure it's him?" Michael shrugged.

"Positive." Garrus's mandibles clicked. "There's no escape this time, Doctor. I'd harvest your organs first, but we don't have the time."

"You're crazy." Dr. Saleon shook his head frantically. "He's crazy. Please, don't let him do this to me."

He glanced over his shoulder at the bodies strewn through the ship. Those had been people, once. Before the 'good doctor' had gotten his hands on them. "Put him out of his misery so we can get going."

"Gladly." Garrus drew his sidearm. "Your days of butchering are over, Doctor."

"No. Please..." The doctor started backing away. "Please."

#

"That was..." Garrus nodded as they stepped out of the room. "Satisfying."

"Good. Remember that feeling." Michael shrugged. "That's how it should be." It hadn't been, at Torfan. Really only helped when you killed the right ones.

"I will, Commander." Garrus looked down at the corpses. "Well, I guess we're done here."

"I'll send a report in." Michael nodded. "Get someone out to identify them and..." He shook his head. "Likely some people out there who could use some closure."

#

"What's going on here?" Michael glanced at the table.

"We were just teaching Wrex how to play cards." One of the engineers said. He looked down at the pot and sighed. "He's pretty good for a beginner."

"A..." Michael rubbed his forehead. "Beginner." He shook his head. "Wrex."

"Shepard."

"Are you hustling my crew?"

"You accusing me of something, Shepard?" Wrex narrowed his eyes.

"You're older than the country of my birth..." Michael shook his head. "And you actually expect me to believe you've never played cards before?"

"Yes." Wrex shrugged.

Michael nodded. "Well, neither have I." He sat down. "Deal me in."

#

The communicator pinged, and he glanced at it before taking a second look. Hackett, requesting secure communication. He opened the channel. "Admiral?"

"Got a problem, son." Hackett folded his arms. "Major Kyle, your commanding officer at Torfan, has set up a small compound in the Hawking Eta cluster. He's attracted a number of biotic followers. He's become an outspoken critic of the Alliance, and we believe he's mentally unstable. This could be trouble, Shepard."

Michael took a deep breath. "What kind of proof do you have that the major is dangerous?"

"Three days ago, we sent two Alliance representatives to meet with him at his compound. They have disappeared. We believe Kyle and his followers killed them." Hackett sighed. "That compound is a cult, Shepard. They call him 'Father Kyle' now. He's set himself up as some kind of religious leader."

He folded his arms. "You said his followers were biotics?" He didn't recall Kyle being a biotic.

"Yes. Major Kyle never showed any biotic tendencies himself, though. I think he's just latched onto a group he identifies with. Many biotics feel marginalized or ostracized by society. Kyle probably sees them as victims who need his protection. And they see him as someone who will fight for them. Unfortunately, he's convinced them the Alliance is somehow responsible for all of their problems. We can't let him go on like this."

"And what were those Alliance representatives going to talk to Major Kyle about?"

"They wanted to bring him back to an Alliance facility for treatment. Major Kyle served us faithfully for many years. We weren't going to abandon him. Given his state of mind, however, he probably saw them as a threat. We're almost certain he had his followers kill them."

"What are you asking me to do here, sir?" He leaned on the desk, slightly afraid of the answer.

Hackett sighed. "You served with him; he might listen to you. But he's already killed two Alliance representatives. I'll trust you to use your judgment. Hackett out."

Well. That was a very helpful failure to answer the question.

#

Kaidan glanced at the commander. They were in a mako, with Garrus, and nobody was talking about sniper rifles. This did not bode well. Garrus was discussing calibrations with Tali, but Shepard hadn't said two words since getting into the mako.

They arrived at the facility, and Shepard climbed out and went to the entrance. The console beeped. "This is a private sanctuary. Outsiders are not welcome here."

"I need to talk to the man in charge. It's important." Shepard's stance was military rest.

"Father Kyle wants nothing more to do with the Alliance."

"My name is Commander Shepard. Major Kyle knows me. I have to speak with him."

"Wait..." Whoever was at the console paused for a moment. "Father Kyle will speak with you. Head to the building at the far end of the compound. He'll meet you there."

Major Kyle? Kaidan wanted to ask, but Shepard was already moving. Was this about Torfan and why... He hurried to catch up, falling into step beside the commander.

#

Major Kyle stared at him. It took a moment before recognition flooded into his eyes. "I know you. The Butcher of Torfan. Why have you come here, Shepard? Why can't you leave us alone?"

"What happened to those other Alliance officers?" Michael kept his hands at his side. The person in front of him had been a good man, once. "The ones who came before me?"

"They wanted to take me away from here. They wanted me to abandon this place. Turn my back on my family. They spoke blasphemy." Kyle punctuated his words with vaguely disjointed gestures. "I did what I could to make their end quick and painless. I had no other choice. It was necessary to protect my children. Only I can keep them safe."

Michael sighed. "The Alliance sent me to bring you in, Major. Can't you see this has gotten out of hand? Don't you understand you're endangering your followers?"

"I respect that you have come under a banner of peace. But I cannot do as you ask. If you take away their father, my children will be helpless."

He turned towards his crew. "Wait outside."

"Sir..." Kaidan started to shake his head.

"That's an order." He waited until they'd left before turning back towards Major Kyle. "Brekin's and his wife had a little girl, about three months ago." He took a deep breath. "Named her

Sandra."

"I..."

"What are we doing here, Kyle?" He rubbed the back of his neck. "Hackett tells me you feel responsible for the soldiers who died back on Torfan."

"I was in command and..." Kyle shook his head. "You were there, Shepard. You know what happened."

"I know a lot of good men and women, all of them a hell of a lot better than the two of us, didn't make it off that planet. Fuck, some days I'm not sure we did either. But I do know this..." He clenched his fists. "Their deaths mattered. Bai. Aditi. Zavala. Meyers. Coltran. Vallen. Gitel." He swallowed. "Taggert, Monet, and Vasquez are all gone now too. They died soldiers. They died heroes. And when this is all said and fucking done..." He took a deep breath. "I'd like to be able to look their ghosts in the eye."

"I..." Kyle sighed. "Vasquez is..." He folded his arms. "I didn't know. How?"

"Refinery fire, out in one of the asteroid fields. Her suit tank ruptured. Safety was seven minutes away. Help was forty minutes away. The crew had ten minutes of air if the safety systems didn't kick on. They needed five minutes of repair work. She had eight minutes of air. She was an Alliance marine, Major. Tell me the truth." He met Kyle's eyes. "Do you think Gabriela Vasquez hesitated?"

"No." Kyle let his arms fall to his sides.

"We're soldiers. When the butcher's bill comes due, we're the ones who pay it. So others won't have to. It's our job. Do you think Gabriela Vasquez hesitated?"

"No."

"One life, so that dozens could live. Do you think Gabriela Vasquez hesitated?"

"No." The word was barely whispered.

"Then where the fuck do you get off taking responsibility for the choices we made back on Torfan? Who the hell do you think you are to take credit for the sacrifices they made? We ended a threat affecting the lives of every colonist out there, threatening the future of Earth and the human race itself. And you have the unmitigated gall to be..." He glared. "Ashamed? Of what they died for?"

"Shepard..."

"Hackett sent me, Kyle. Look at me." He narrowed his eyes. "Hackett sent me. You know who and what I am. You know what I can do. What I have done. Hackett sent me. Your decision, Major. What happens now?"

#

He looked up when Shepard came out of the room. Shepard gestured for them to follow. Kaidan glanced over his shoulder as they did, and saw Major Kyle was still in the room, leaning on his desk. Shepard's glare had the residents of the compound rather eager to get out of his way.

As soon as they were outside, Shepard hit the communicator. "Joker, get on the horn and tell the Fifth Fleet they can pick Major Kyle up in an hour at this location."

"Command -"

"You heard me, Flight Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir." Shepard walked over to the mako without another word, and popped the hatch open. Garrus glanced at Kaidan, and Kaidan gestured for him to follow.

#

"Your helmsman just forwarded your report on Major Kyle." Hackett looked back at him. "It's a bit sparse."

"I asked him to surrender peacefully." Michael twitched a shoulder. "He did."

"That's your story?"

"That's what happened."

"After what happened at the biotic compound..." Hackett slowly nodded. "Seemed a chance worth taking. Major Kyle surrendered to us without incident. Now we can make sure he gets the help he needs."

"Sir?" Michael raised an eyebrow.

"If I'd have sent anybody else, it would likely have ended in a bloodbath. I think..." Half Hackett's mouth turned up in a smile. "Maybe this Spectre thing agrees with you."

"Pinnacle Station." He narrowed his eyes. "Only hit you're going to land is when you hit the mat."

"Shepard, you're doing that thing where your mouth is making noise. You should see to that." Hackett started to reach for the control. "You did good, son. Hackett out."

#

Kaidan hesitated a moment when the voice on the other side of the door told him to enter. Then he stepped through and waited for it to shut behind him. He held up the datapad. "Commander, I..."

"Looked around until you found an excuse to check up on me." Shepard finished the sentence, and then raised an eyebrow.

"Well..." Kaidan rubbed his neck. "Yes. Um..."

"Is it at least a good excuse?"

"No, not really." He tossed the datapad aside. "You check up on us after every mission. I just thought this one might call for a return of the favor. I..." Kaidan sighed. "Are you alright, sir?"

"Good question." Shepard folded his arms, and then shrugged. "Yeah. Actually, I think I am."

"You're not just saying that?" Kaidan raised an eyebrow.

"Haven't lied to you yet." Shepard gestured to a chair, and then sat down in the other one. "Which is actually something of a record for me."

It was funny how touched he was by that casual statement. Kaidan sat down in the offered chair. "Any thoughts on where to head next?"

"No." Shepard sighed. "Liara suggested pulling up the star map and 'letting my subconscious guide us'."

"And?"

"My subconscious apparently wants to find out what it's like to fly through a black hole." He leaned back. "I blame the weekend 'classic matinee' for that."

"You like classic movies?"

"The ticket machine was really easy to hack and..." Shepard twitched his shoulder. "Yeah."

#

"Good timing, Commander. We've got a transmission coming in from the Citadel. Top priority clearance."

"Is it the ambassador?" This better not be a complaint about them blowing up part of a training base on the moon. Hackett had asked them to, after all.

"Not his signature. I think it's from the Council. I'll patch it through the comm room."

The Asari councilor... Did they even have names? The Asari councilor nodded at him. "Commander Shepard. We've received information that may be critical to your mission against Saren."

If they were calling to tell him Saren's shoe size, he was going to have Wrex eat them. "What kind of information?"

"We've received an urgent message from one of our infiltration regiments in the Traverse." The salarian waved a hand.

Spies. Well, the STG did know what they were doing. Sometimes. Sort of. "What did they find?"

"Unfortunately, the message we received was little more than static. The infiltration team must be in a situation where they can't set up proper interstellar communications. But the message was sent on a

channel reserved for mission-critical communications. Whatever they were trying to tell us, we know it was important." The salarian nodded. "Considering your interest in Saren, we thought you might want to investigate this. Fine out what happened to our team. The signal originated from the planet Virmire."

"I'll look into it." The lead wasn't much, but it was better than he'd had ten minutes ago.

"The Council prefers not to become involved in the specifics of Spectre activities." The Asari councilor shifted her weight slightly. "We only want you to be aware of all your options, including Virmire. Good luck, Commander Shepard. We will keep you advised if we learn anything else." She hit something on her end, and the holographic images disappeared.

Michael sighed, and hit his communicator. "Joker, set a course for Virmire."

14. Chapter 14

"Commander, I'm reading a signal. Must be our salarian infiltration team." Joker gestured at the console readout.

Kaidan let out a low whistle. "Check out those defense towers."

"Why can't it ever be simple?" Michael sighed. "Drop the mako. We'll go in hot and take them out." He started for the bay, Kaidan a pace behind. He leaned into the mess room. "Tali. Ash. Feel like going for a nice drive along the beach and then blowing up some geth?"

Ashley put a hand over her heart. "You do know how to show a girl a good time, Shepard."

#

"Fifty credits."

"I don't..." Tali shook her head. "I keep forgetting I'm actually being paid for helping the Alliance." She laughed. "Fine. Fifty credits on Wrex."

"What are you two betting on?" Ashley glanced back over her shoulder.

"Who can get more distance when biotically throwing a geth." Michael shrugged.

Ashley glanced at Kaidan before looking back at Wrex. "Sorry, LT. I have to put my fifty on Wrex."

"Yeah. No offense to the human race or anything, but..." Garrus waved a hand. "Fifty on Wrex." He glanced at the third biotic. "Unless Liara wants to play, in which case, fifty on her."

"Liara is not playing." She shook her head.

"We're out of geth here." Michael looked around. "We can settle this at the next gate."

"Do I get a say in this?" Kaidan raised an eyebrow.

"No."

#

"You realize you're going to be out a hundred and fifty credits." Kaidan glanced at Shepard. He wasn't at all comfortable about the idea of throwing around geth body parts in competition with Wrex.

"Only if I lose." Shepard shrugged. "Not worried."

"Why not?"

Shepard glanced over his shoulder and to Kaidan's surprise, actually smiled. "Cause I'm the one betting on you."

He found himself smiling back. "Well, alright then."

#

"Guns are down and..." Michael shrugged. "You each owe me fifty credits. Except Ashley. She owes me a hundred."

"I do?"

"You never paid up on the last bet."

"Gambling is against regulations, skipper."

"One. Hundred. Credits." Michael opened the channel to the Normandy. "Joker."

"I'm reading that the grid is down, Commander. On approach to the salarian base now. Out."

#

"Commander. Normandy's touched down at the base, but it looks like we're grounded." Joker's voice came over the comm. "The salarian captain can explain when you get here."

Michael shook his head. "Well, the explanation better be good, or I'm going to let Wrex eat him."

#

Ashley already had a salarian in her sights when Michael made it over. "So what are we supposed to do now?"

"Stay put until we can come up with a plan." The salarian gestured.

"Are you in charge here?" Michael joined Ashley and Kaidan. "What's the situation?"

"I'm Captain Kirrahe, Third Infiltration Regiment STG. You and your crew have just landed in the middle of a hotzone. Every AA gun within

ten miles has been alerted to your presence."

"That's just great." Michael folded his arms. "What now?"

"We stay put until the Council sends the reinforcements we requested."

"We are the reinforcements." Kaidan shook his head.

"What? You're all they sent? I told the Council to send a fleet." He wasn't so good at reading salarian body language, but he'd bet ten credits Kirrahe was pissed.

"We couldn't understand your transmission. They sent me to investigate."

Kirrahe took a deep breath. "That is a repetition of our task. I lost half my men investigating this place."

"So what have you found?" Kaidan looked around the camp.

"Saren's base of operations. He's set up a research facility here, but it's crawling with geth and very well fortified."

Well, maybe this wasn't a waste of time after all. "Is he here? Have you seen him?"

"No. But his geth are everywhere, and we've intercepted some comms referring to Saren." Kirrahe glanced over his shoulder. "This is his facility, there's no doubt about that."

Michael nodded. "What's Saren researching?"

"He's using the facility to breed an army of krogan."

Wrex immediately turned his attention away from where he'd been talking to Tali. "How is that possible?"

"Apparently, Saren has discovered a cure for the genophage."

"Oh." Michael shook his head. Who would have thought he'd ever miss the days when giant plant monsters were his biggest problem? Actually, that hadn't really been all that long ago, had it?

"Without it, the krogan will quickly overrun the galaxy. And these krogan follow Saren."

"The geth are bad enough. But with a krogan army..." He'd seen Wrex in action. The man really was a tank. "He'd be almost unstoppable."

"Exactly my thoughts. We must ensure that this facility and its secrets are destroyed."

Saying that in front of the krogan? Not the best idea. Wrex immediately drew himself up to his full and not inconsiderable height. "Destroyed? I don't think so. Our people are dying. This cure can save them."

"If that cure leaves this planet, the krogan will become unstoppable. We can't make the same mistake again." Kirrahe shook his head.

Wrex advanced. "We are not a mistake." For a moment, Michael thought the krogan actually was going to eat the salarian. Wrex shook his head, and walked away.

"Is he going to be a problem?" Kirrahe watched him go. "We already have enough angry krogan to deal with."

"He's my problem." Michael folded his arms. "Don't worry about it, captain."

"I do worry. That's why I'm still alive." Kirrahe shook his head. "Why don't you go talk to the krogan. My men and I need some time to come up with a new plan of attack. In the meantime, if you need any supplies you can talk to Commander Rentola. He's in one of the tents nearby." Kirrahe walked away.

He turned to face Kaidan and Ashley. Kaidan nodded. "Looks like things are a bit of a mess."

"Yeah." Ashley sighed. "I wouldn't be so worried if it wasn't for Wrex. He looks like he's going to blow a gasket."

"You two have an incredible gift for understatement." Michael glanced in Wrex's direction. "Get the lay of the land. I'll go..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Be diplomatic. Might want to find some cover."

#

Wrex was shooting at the water when Michael walked over to him. "This isn't right, Shepard. If there's a cure for the genophage, we can't destroy it."

"Calm down, Wrex. I'm not the enemy here. Saren's the one you should be mad at." Michael sighed.

"Really? Saren created a cure for my people. You want to destroy it. Help me out here, Shepard. The lines between friend and foe are getting a little blurry from where I stand."

"I don't want to destroy it. And if there is any possible way take out Saren without destroying the cure, then that's what I'll do." Michael stared up at Wrex. "But this isn't a cure, it's a weapon. And if Saren is allowed to use it, you won't be around to reap the benefits. None of us will."

"That's a chance we should be willing to take. This is the fate of my entire people we're talking about." Wrex advanced until he was only inches away. "I've been loyal to you so far. Hell, you did more for me than my family ever did. But if I'm going to keep following you, I need to know we're doing it for the right reasons."

Next thing he knew, Wrex's shotgun was pointed at him. He realized he'd drawn his own rifle almost out of reflex. "All you need to know is that I'm giving you an order to fall in line."

"So that's it. All this time, and that's all I get from you?" Wrex

glared. "How can you not see what this means to the krogan?" He shifted his shotgun just slightly. "This base can't be destroyed. I won't allow it."

Michael stared at him, and then made the call. He holstered his rifle. "Saren doesn't care about these krogan. They're tools, puppets. He'll destroy them as soon as they're no longer useful to him. Is that what you want for your people?"

Silence. A shotgun, aimed at him. Wrex's red eyes blinked. "No. We were tools for the Council once. To thank us for wiping out the rachni, they neutered us all. I doubt Saren will be as generous." It took a few more seconds, but Wrex put the shotgun away. "All right, Shepard. You've made your point. I don't like this, but I trust you enough to follow your lead." He straightened. "Just one thing. When we find Saren, I want his head."

#

Kaidan watched Shepard walk back over, leaving Wrex standing at the water. He nodded when Shepard came in range. "Nice work with Wrex. I didn't think anything would calm him down."

"I wouldn't say he's calm." Shepard glanced back over his shoulder. "But his rage is pointed in the right direction again."

He sighed. "For a minute there, I thought you were going to kill him..." He met Shepard's eyes. "You lowered your gun."

"I've never been one for listening to someone who had a gun pointed at me." Shepard shrugged. "Figured Wrex was the same."

"So you..." Kaidan shifted his weight slightly. "Bet your life you could talk him down?"

"Yeah, guess I did." Shepard shook his head. "You've been a really bad influence on me with this whole 'diplomacy' thing. I almost even said please."

"I uh..." Kaidan sighed. "Maybe you should have tried it out under less life-threatening conditions first?"

"Kaidan..." Shepard raised an eyebrow. "When, exactly, would that be?"

"Good point."

Shepard patted him on the shoulder before heading back to talk to the salarians.

#

"Thank you for speaking with the krogan. The assault on Saren's base will be difficult enough as it is."

"I'm hoping that means there is a plan?" Michael raised an eyebrow at Kirrahe.

"Of sorts. We can convert our ship's drive system into a twenty-kiloton ordnance. Crude, but effective."

"Nice." Ashley nodded. "Drop that nuke from orbit and Saren can kiss his turian ass goodbye."

"Unfortunately, the facility is too well-fortified for that. We'll need to place the bomb at a precise location." Kirrahe indicated a map. "The bomb must be taken to the far side of the facility. Your ship can drop it off, but we'll need to infiltrate the base, disable the AA guns, and pacify any ground forces first."

Oh. Was that all? Next to him, Kaidan shook his head. "You want us to go in on foot? We don't have enough men."

Michael looked over the map, and frowned. Actually, assuming the salarians knew which end of a gun to hold, they might. It just was going to be a bloody repeat of Torfan. Shit. Shit shit shit shit shit. "It's sure not going to be simple."

"No, it won't." Kirrahe leaned on the other side of the makeshift table. "We just don't have the numbers to meet them head on. I'm going to divide my men into three teams and hit the front of the facility. While we've got their attention, you can sneak your 'shadow' team in the back."

He nodded. "How long do you think your people can hold?"

"We're tougher than we look, Commander. But it's true. I don't expect many of us will make it out alive." Kirrahe looked up at him. "And that makes what I'm going to ask even more difficult. I need one of your men to accompany me. To help coordinate the teams."

"You expect me to commit one of my people to your command?" It wasn't like Kirrahe had made a great impression thus far.

"We are all soldiers by trade. If your people are not prepared to face such a risk, would you really want them by your side?"

"He's right, Commander." Kaidan nodded. "We can't do this without both teams at their best. I volunteer."

"Not so fast, LT." Ashley shook her head. "Commander Shepard will need you to arm the nuke. I'll go with the salarians."

"With all due respect, Gunnery Chief, it's not your place to decide." Kaidan folded his arms.

"Why is it that whenever someone says 'with all due respect' they really mean 'kiss my ass?'" Ashley raised an eyebrow.

Prepared for the risk of enemy action was one thing. Prepared for the potential incompetence of a commanding officer was another. He was just going to have to hope the council knew what it was doing when it sent this guy. And the salarians would stand a better chance if they had a heavy. At least he wouldn't have to worry about Ashley eating any of them. Maybe. "Williams, you'll accompany the captain. No heroics, understood?"

"Aye, aye, Commander." She saluted.

Kirrahe nodded. "I will have the ordnance loaded onto the Normandy

and brief your crew on its detonation sequencing. Do you have any questions before we go, Commander?"

They went over the exit strategy. Michael just hoped some of the salarians were alive to use it. He mentally mapped the potential routes to his target before shoving the map at Garrus to let him do the same thing. It wasn't a great plan. It was just the only plan they had.

#

"Well, this is it. Don't do anything stupid while I'm gone, LT. You too, Commander." Ashley nodded.

"We'll be fine." Kaidan nodded to her. "You'll see." He really hoped he wasn't lying.

"Yeah, I just..." Ashley sighed. "Good luck."

"Is there something you want to say, Chief?" Shepard raised an eyebrow.

"I don't know. It's just weird. Going under someone else's command. I've got used to working with you..." She shrugged. "All of you."

"Don't worry, we'll see you on the other side." Kaidan tried to give her a reassuring smile.

"And those salarians are crazy. You'll fit right in." Shepard shrugged.

Ashley snorted. "I know. I, ah..." She took a deep breath. "It's been an honor serving with you, Commander."

"Just remember, gunny..." Shepard handed her an extra ammo block. "You die, I'm stealing your booze." He looked over his team. "Whatever happens, everyone just keep shooting. We go in hard, hit 'em harder, and we'll be the only damn thing that comes out on the other side."

"You bet, Commander." Ashley saluted.

#

"You all know the mission, and what is at stake. I have come to trust each of you with my life - but I have also heard murmurs of discontent. I share your concerns. We are trained for espionage; we would be legends, but the records are sealed. Glory in battle is not our way. Think of our heroes; the Silent Step, who defeated a nation with a single shot. Or the Ever Alert, who kept armies at bay with hidden facts. These giants do not seem to give us solace here, but they are not all that we are. Before the network, there was the fleet. Before diplomacy, there were soldiers! Our influence stopped the rachni, but before that we held the line! Our influence stopped the krogan, but before that, we held the line! Our influence will stop Saren; in the battle today, we will hold the line!"

Michael nodded. He had to give Kirrahe credit. The man could make a speech. Time for him to go hold up his end.

Kirrahe saluted. "Good luck, Commander. I hope we will meet again."

15. Chapter 15

"...then it might as well be tissue paper."

"But when it comes to protection from environmental issues..."

"As soon as the trees start shooting at..."

"Feros."

"Damn. Good point. Still, with the supplemental Elkoss plating..."

Kaidan sighed, and ran a hand down his face, and glanced at Tali. "You know, when I suggested they talk about something other than sniper rifles..."

"You were hoping for something other than an hour of arguing about armor types?" Tali sighed, and shook her head at Shepard and Garrus. "Nerds."

"Hey..." Shepard glared. "I represent that!" He started to say something else, but the communicator beeped.

Kirrahe's voice came over. "Comm check. Do you read me, Commander?"

"Loud and clear."

"Good. We'll start our push. We'll try to make it to the AA guns, but it might be up to you to finish the job. And Commander? If you see any way to undermine their defenses, we could use the help."

"Alright, people." Shepard hefted his rifle. "Let's go apply rule seven."

Tali tilted her head. "Rule seven?"

"When all else fails, blow shit up."

#

"Tali, turret controls." Michael tossed her one of the small explosive packs, then shifted position to snipe some of the oncoming geth.

The quarian set the charge, and then dove for cover. Wrex moved in and stomped, crushing the head of a half-destroyed geth still trying to get to its weapon.

"Communications disrupted." Tali got back to her feet and tossed off a salute. "What do I blow up next?"

"Geth comm units." He shrugged, and then glanced at Kaidan. "We've

been a really bad influence on her."

#

He heard Ashley's voice on the comm. "We're getting pounded. Bunker up before the aircraft return."

"Tali, with me. The rest of you, cover us." Michael pointed. "Let's blow those refueling tanks before the aircraft take off again." He moved in, Tali on his heels.

#

"We've got access to base security." Kaidan looked over the hacked console. "Should be able to cut alarms from here. Might even be able to trigger alarms on the far side of the base. It'll clear the guards out for us, but they might be too much for Williams and the salarians to handle." He gave Shepard a worried look.

"I am not letting Williams have all the fun." Shepard's eyes didn't quite match the flippant remark. He shook his head. "Just disable the alarms. We can handle any guards inside."

Kaidan nodded. So far they were pretty unscathed, but from what they were hearing over the comms the salarians were taking casualties. The commander was more worried than he was letting on.

#

"Salarian prisoners?" Michael frowned.

"The captain said something about losing some men." Kaidan nodded.

Michael rubbed the back of his neck, and approached one of the cells. The salarian inside rose. "Who are you? Alliance, right? I knew someone would come. It tried to break me, but it couldn't. I shut it out."

It didn't read right. His instincts were screaming at him. "Nobody is going anywhere until I get some answers."

"Private Menos Avot of the Third Infiltration Regiment STG, sir. Captured while on reconnaissance six days ago. Glad to answer, sir. Never any questions from these bastards. Just whispers and poking and cutting. I'd have said anything to get out and get some payback. That's not too much to ask, is it? A little payback?"

Benezia's face flashed in his mind for a moment. Whispers. "What did they do to you, soldier?"

"Experiments, but I don't know what for. The effect of incessant whispering on my shortening temper? Who knows? I just need out."

"Something's not right here, Commander." Kaidan shook his head.

No. Something was definitely not right. "Setting him free could endanger the mission."

"No. No, I need to get out. This room is too small and it keeps talking and I really want to get out of here and get some work done. I need to get out. Let me out."

"Commander..."

"We can't take the chance." Michael shook his head.

"Can't take the chance..." The salarian waved a hand. "No chance. I need to do what it says. I have to. Let me out. Let me out. Let me out. Let me out. Let me out."

There was a thumping sound as the salarian rammed himself into the door. He left a small trail of blood as he slumped to the ground.

Kaidan swallowed. "This has to be more of that indoctrination we've heard about, Commander. What is this place?"

"I don't know." Michael narrowed his eyes. "But I don't like it. Let's find our target and blow it the fuck up."

#

The strange husk beings were all over the lab. The krogan in the tanks appeared to have some similar circuitry embedded in them. Wrex punched one of the tanks, but nodded to Michael. Michael returned the nod.

Then he stepped back and let Wrex deal with the scientist in charge. It was... messy.

#

"Don't shoot. Please, I just want to get out of here before it's too late." There was an asari cowering under a desk.

"Everyone in this place is trying to kill me."

She rose, and gestured at herself. "Do I look like a soldier? I'm a neurospecialist. And this job isn't worth dying over. Or worse. You think indoctrination only affects prisoners? Sooner or later, Saren will want to dissect my brain too."

That was very much not helping her case. "I thought this was a breeding facility."

"Not this level. We're studying Sovereign's effect on organic minds. At least, that's what I assumed. Saren kept us in the dark as much as possible."

"You helped him and you don't even know why?" Kaidan stared at her.

"I didn't have the option of negotiating. This position is a little more..." She shook her head. "Permanent than I'd expected. But I can help you. This elevator behind me goes to Saren's private lab. I can get you in." She swiped a card. Wow. Impressive. "See? Full access. All of Saren's private files. Are we good? Can I go?"

No. "What were you studying here?"

"It's that ship, Sovereign. It emits some kind of..." She shrugged. "Signal. Undetectable, but it's there. I've seen the effects. Saren uses it to influence his followers, to control them. It's called indoctrination. Direct exposure to the signal turns you into a mindless slave, like the salarian test subjects. But there's collateral damage, too."

He asked her a few more questions, and noted that both Kaidan and Liara were paying close attention to the answers. Good. Maybe those two could make sense of it all later. Though the idea that Saren might not be the one controlling the ship was... A bit more disturbing than he liked. He ran the math as she spoke, and there was unfortunately really only one conclusion.

"You conducted brutal experiments on helpless test subjects. You helped Saren. You don't get to live."

"I just did what I was told. I didn't have a choice. I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't help your victims."

"No. No." She started to run, and he shot her in the head. There was a time for diplomacy, and there was a time for guns. He headed into the lab.

#

Kaidan spared a glance for the corpse. As much as he didn't like the idea of gunning down an unarmed woman, he couldn't actually say with certainty that Shepard was wrong. He sighed, and followed Shepard into the lab.

#

"Commander, look over here. It's another beacon. Like the one on Eden Prime."

Michael headed in the direction of Kaidan's voice. Sure enough, there was another beacon. Glowing. Damn thing was practically taunting him. He sighed. "Well..." He took a deep breath. "This is going to suck." He walked to the beacon, and touched the controls.

Images flooded into his head once more.

#

He moved in as soon as Shepard collapsed, helping him back to his feet. Kaidan ran the medical scanner over him. "Commander?"

"I was right." Shepard rubbed the back of his neck. "It sucked. But..." He nodded. "We'll sort it later, but I think I might have what we need now. Maybe."

Liara grinned. Dammit, she really was going to dissect him this time.

#

They headed back up and saw a hologram of Sovereign hanging in the air. Wrex sighed. "I get the feeling something bad is about to happen."

"You too?" Michael shook his head.

"You are not Saren." The voice came from the hologram.

"What is that?" Kaidan frowned. "Some kind of VI interface?"

"Rudimentary creatures of blood and flesh. You touch my mind, fumbling in ignorance, incapable of understanding."

"I don't think this is a VI..." Kaidan stared.

"This is a realm of existence so far beyond your own you cannot even imagine it. I am beyond your comprehension. I am Sovereign."

"Sovereign isn't just some Reaper ship Saren found." Michael folded his arms. "It's an actual Reaper."

"Reaper? A label created by the Protheans to give voice to their destruction. In the end, what they choose to call us is irrelevant. We simply are."

Wrex scoffed. "The Protheans vanished 50,000 years ago. You couldn't have been there. It's impossible."

"Organic life is nothing but a genetic mutation, an accident. Your lives are measured in years and decades. You wither and die. We are eternal. The pinnacle of evolution and existence. Before us, you are nothing. Your extinction is inevitable. We are the end of everything."

"Whatever your plan is, it's going to fail. I'll make sure of that." Michael narrowed his eyes.

"Confidence born of ignorance. The cycle cannot be broken."

"Cycle? What cycle?" Kaidan asked.

"The pattern has repeated itself more times than you can fathom. Organic civilizations rise, evolve, advance. And at the apex of their glory, they are extinguished. The Protheans were not the first. They did not create the Citadel. They did not forge the mass relays. They merely found them, the legacy of my kind."

"Why would you construct the mass relays, then leave them for someone else to find?"

"Your civilization is based on the technology of the mass relays, our technology. By using it, your society develops along the paths we desire."

"They're harvesting us." Kaidan took a half step backward. "Letting us advance to the level they need, then wiping us out."

"You're not even alive. Not really." Michael shook his head. "You're just a machine. And machines can be broken."

"Your words are as empty as your future. I am the vanguard of your destruction. This exchange is over."

And something exploded.

#

"Commander?" Joker's voice came over the comm. "We got trouble?"

"Lay it on me, Joker." Michael shook his head. "I love bad news."

"That ship, Sovereign? It's moving. I don't know what you did down there, but that thing just pulled a turn that would shear any of our ships in half. It's coming your way, and it's coming hard. You need to wrap things up in there - fast."

"This console is shot." Kaidan gestured at the controls in front of them. "Orders, Commander?"

"We'll head for the breeding facility. Time to blow this place to hell."

"Right, Commander. I'll meet you there. Joker out."

#

"Commander?" Liara glanced at him.

"We can discuss things back on the ship." Michael gave her a reassuring nod. "The last thing I'm going to be intimidated by is a giant cockroach." He hefted his rifle. "I'm from New York."

#

"Tali, there's the AA gun." He gestured. For a moment, he thought he heard her giggle as she headed that way. He shrugged, and put an explosive round in one of the oncoming krogan.

"That's nineteen for me." Garrus shifted his position.

"Only nineteen?" Michael sniped one of the geth drones. "You getting sick or something, Vakarian?"

"Please, those drones only count for a quarter of a kill."

"Says who?"

There was a boom. Kirrahe's voice came over the comm. "Good work on the gun, Shadow team. Now it's our turn."

#

Joker brought the Normandy in, and the crew began carrying the nuke off and putting it into place. Kaidan shook his head. "Bomb is in

position, we're all set he-

Ashley's voice came over the comm. "Commander, can you read me?"

"The nuke is almost ready. Get your ass to the rendezvous point, Williams."

"Negative, Commander. The geth have us pinned down on the AA tower. We've taken heavy casualties. We'll never make the rendezvous in time."

Shit. "Hold tight. We're coming to get you."

"Negative. Just make sure that nuke is set. We'll hold them as long as we -"

"It's okay, Commander." Kaidan glanced up from where he was working on the nuke. "I need a couple of minutes to finish arming the bomb. Go get them and meet me back here."

"You keep that nuke safe." He nodded to Kaidan and started moving.

#

More krogan and geth. Liara used her biotics to pick up a krogan and bowl over a half dozen geth. Maybe it wasn't just Tali they'd been a bad influence on.

#

"Reinforcements. We'd better hurry." Garrus gestured at the ship coming in.

"Heads up, L-T. We just spotted a troop ship headed to your location."

"It's already here. There's geth pouring out all over the bomb site."

Fuck. "Can you hold them off?" Michael glanced in the direction the ship had gone.

"There's too many. I don't think we can survive until you get here." Kaidan's voice was tight. "I'm activating the bomb."

"What the hell are you doing, Alenko?" Michael narrowed his eyes.

"I'm just making sure this bomb goes off. No matter what." Kaidan was silent for a moment. "It's done, Commander. Go get Williams and get the hell out of here."

"Screw that. We can handle ourselves. Go back and get Alenko."

If those geth managed to disarm or even relocate the bomb then... He shook his head, and turned around. "Alenko, radio Joker and tell him to meet us at the bomb site."

It took Kaidan a moment to respond. "Yes, Commander. I..."

"You know it's the right choice, LT." Ashley's voice said. He could see Tali start shaking. Wrex put a hand on the quarian's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Ash. I had to make a choice."

"I understand, Commander. I don't regret a thing."

No. The regrets were going to be his.

#

Over the radio, he could hear Ashley's team fighting. They were going to have one hell of an honor guard on their entrance to Valhalla. "Commander, set that nuke and get out. We can't hold them... Damn it. Suppressing fire. Cover your flank. Cover your -" The comm went dead. He heard Tali let out a ragged gasp.

Michael growled, and hurled a grenade into a group of geth.

#

For a moment, he thought they were clear. And then something exploded. It knocked Kaidan and the other crewman by the bomb off their feet. Michael whirled to see Saren. Dammit, why hadn't anyone told him that bastard was a biotic? He dodged the attack, rolling into cover. Too close of range for the rifle. He came up, firing the sidearm. It failed to get through Saren's barrier, and he ducked back.

"I applaud you, Shepard. My geth were utterly convinced the salarians were the real threat. An impressive diversion." Saren leaped down from his glider. "Of course, it was all for nothing. I can't let you disrupt what I have accomplished here. You can't possibly understand what's really at stake."

"This isn't complicated." He shook his head. "You'll do anything to get power. Even joining with the Reapers."

"You've seen the vision from the beacons, Shepard. You, of all people, should understand what the Reapers are capable of. They cannot be stopped. Do not mire yourself in pointless revolt. Do not sacrifice everything for the sake of petty freedoms. The Protheans tried to fight, and they were utterly destroyed." Saren waved a hand. "Trillions dead. But what if they had bowed before the invaders? Would the Protheans still exist? Is submission not preferable to extinction?"

His father's foot had connected with his ribs just moments after asking a similar question. "I'd rather die than live under the rule of those machines."

"Now you see why I never came forward with this to the Council. We organics are driven by emotion instead of logic. We will fight even when we know we cannot win. But if we work with the Reapers - if we make ourselves useful - think of how many lives could be spared. Once I understood this, I joined Sovereign, though I was aware of the..." Saren shook his head. "Dangers. I had hoped this facility could

protect me."

"You're like every other poor bastard in this place. A tool Sovereign can use, then cast aside."

"I've studied the effects of indoctrination. The more control Sovereign exerts, the less capable the subject becomes. That is my saving grace. Sovereign needs me to find the Conduit. My mind is still my own..." Saren shrugged. "For now. But the transformation from ally to servant can be subtle. I will not let it happen to me."

Stupid and crazy. And just competent enough for those two things to be a deadly combo. "I'm not like you. I'd rather die fighting than live as a slave."

"I'm not doing this for myself. Don't you see? Sovereign will succeed. It is inevitable. My way is the only way any of us will survive. I'm forging an alliance between us and the Reapers. Between organics and machines. And in doing so, I will save more lives than have ever existed. But you would undo my work. You would doom our entire civilization to complete annihilation. And for that, you must die."

Michael came up shooting.

#

Saren threw a grenade, and the shockwave knocked him off his feet. Worse, it knocked his rifle out of his hands and sent it into the water.

Before he could find it, Saren grabbed him, lifting him by the throat. Something else exploded, and Saren turned towards it. He punched the turian in the face, and they both fell.

Michael grabbed his sidearm again, but Saren was already back within range of his glider's shields. Alarms started going off. He looked around for his team.

Wrex was lifting a piece of rubble while Tali pulled Garrus out from under it. Liara moved towards Kaidan, who was holding his ribs and apparently unable to stand. The other crewman lay face down in the water, half his head gone. Michael growled, and went to pull Kaidan to his feet.

The Normandy landed, and they stared moving towards it. Kaidan stumbled and nearly fell again. Michael caught him, then slung him over his shoulder and carried him into the ship. As soon as they were on board, he yelled for Joker to get them moving.

"Everybody hang on." Joker's voice came back over the comm.

He set Kaidan down, and patted his shoulder. Kaidan nodded. Tali was staring at the hatch. Michael walked over and put a hand on her shoulder. She turned, and then leaned into him. He sighed, and hugged her as she started to cry.

"I..." Kaidan shook his head as he looked at the empty chair. "I can't believe Ash didn't make it. How could we just leave her down there?"

"Williams knew the risks going in. She gave her life to save the rest of us." Too many faces fought for space in his memory.

"But why me?" Kaidan looked up at him. "Why not her?"

It was something of a surprise to realize he didn't actually know how to answer that question. The bomb had been a concern, but... "It wasn't your call, Alenko. I had to choose. I chose you."

"But if I'd done my job, you wouldn't have had to make that call."

That kind of thinking was exactly what they didn't need. Kaidan had done his job. They'd all done their jobs. None of that changed rule ten. "It wasn't your fault. It wasn't my fault. The only one to blame here is Saren."

"Yes, sir. I'm -" Kaidan sighed, and nodded. "We'll get it done."

"Commander?" Liara spoke up. "Excuse me for interrupting." He could have kissed her for interrupting. "But I have an idea. I think the beacon you found in Saren's base was similar to the one you found on Eden Prime. It may have filled in the missing pieces of your vision. I might be able to help you put all those pieces together."

"You want to join our minds again, don't you?" His head already hurt. He stood. "Okay. Go ahead."

It was different this time. The images were still riotous, but there was an order to them. A pattern. He just didn't know what it meant. Liara was staring at him. "Incredible. I..." She shook her head. "I never thought the images would be so..." She smiled. "Intense. I need a moment to collect myself."

"Did the vision make any sense to you?" Ash died for this. It better damn well be worth it.

"It's a distress call, a message sent out across the Prothean Empire. A warning against the Reapers, but the warning came too late."

"What about the Conduit?"

"There were other images. Locations. Places I recognized from my research..." Her eyes abruptly widened. "Ilos. The Conduit is on Ilos." She gestured. "That is why Saren needed to find the Mu Relay. It is the only way to get to Ilos."

"Alright." Michael nodded. "We need to get to Ilos."

"Forget it." It was Tali who spoke. "The Mu Relay's inside the Terminus Systems. Alliance ships are not welcome there. Neither are Spectres."

Getting into places he wasn't welcome was kind of his speciality.

"The Conduit's on Ilos. That's where Saren is heading. I'll be waiting for him when he gets there."

"Saren will have his entire fleet orbiting Ilos. You will never make it down to the surface without reinforcements. You must alert the Council. We need a fleet to -" Liara started swaying. "I am sorry. The joining is..." She rubbed her forehead. "Exhausting. I should go to the medical bay and lie down for a moment."

"We're done here." He glanced at Kaidan and flicked his eyes at Liara. Kaidan nodded and began helping Liara to the medical bay. "Dismissed."

#

"Commander, there's a comm buoy nearby. I can link us in if you want to report back to the Citadel Council. You know, to warn them about Sovereign."

"Dear Council, giant cockroach incoming. Prepare the biggest fucking boot you have." Michael sighed.

"Sir?"

"Set the link up, Joker. They need to know."

"Patching it through."

The asari councilor glared at him the moment her image appeared. "I hope you don't plan to cut us off like last time, Commander. What you discovered on Virmire is too important."

The turian nodded. "Saren is formidable enough without an army of krogan serving under him."

"Sovereign's the real problem here. The Reapers wiped out the Protheans. We're next."

"Yes, we saw mention of this in your report. Sovereign. A sentient machine. A true artificial intelligence. This news is quite alarming..." The salarian shrugged. "If it turns out to be accurate."

He wondered what it said about salarians that they'd stuck one of their dumbest and most annoying into a leadership role. "Sovereign's real. The Reapers are real. Saren even admitted it."

"He's playing you, Shepard. Saren still has contacts on the Citadel." The turian waved a hand. "He probably saw your earlier reports. The ones talking about your vision. And the Reapers."

"It's highly possible Saren is using false information to throw you off balance. Our own intelligence has never turned up any corroborating information." The salarian shook his... her... dammit...'s head.

That really didn't say much for their intelligence. Fuck, now they had him punning. "I tried to warn you about Saren. You didn't believe me then, and look how that turned out."

"I believe you humans have a saying: even a broken clock is right twice a day."

"Here's another saying..." He narrowed his eyes. "Go to hell."

"Maybe we were wrong about you, Shepard. Maybe humans are too hot-headed to be Spectres."

"Enough." The asari councilor gave the turian a look. "Commander Shepard has performed admirably so far. This..." She folded her arms. "Discussion is only a minor disagreement."

It wasn't as if he'd wanted this damn job in the first place. "We seem to have a lot of disagreements, Councilor."

"Try to see this from our perspective, Commander. Saren is a threat we can recognize. However, as far as we know, the Reapers only exist in your visions."

"Our decisions affect trillions of lives. We cannot act on the accusations of a single person. Even a Spectre. Not without solid evidence."

"The Council cannot take any official action here. That is why we created the Spectres. You have the authority to act as you see fit."

"If you truly believe Sovereign is the real threat, you must take whatever steps are necessary to stop it. And Saren."

"Good luck, Commander. From all of us."

Their images winked out of existence. He stood there a moment longer, leaning on one of the railings. Then he sighed, and straightened. There was a letter he needed to write.

#

He checked on their salarian stowaways. Kirrahe nodded to him. "My superiors will duly honor Chief Williams for her action. Her sacrifice has earned humanity a great deal of respect from my people."

Alright, so maybe the salarian race as a whole wasn't a total loss. "She knew what the risks were. Any of my officers would have done the same."

"Of course. A grim reality that every soldier must accept." Kirrahe nodded. "Rest assured, Commander, my men and I will not forget what you have accomplished here."

Good.

#

"Commander." Wrex nodded to him. "Things got heated back on Virmire..." He shrugged. "You did what you had to do. I respect your choice."

"I appreciate what you did, Wrex." If anything, the krogan had lost the most down there. "I won't forget it."

"Just make sure it was worth it. Saren has to pay for what he's done."

"No matter what it takes, I'm going to hunt him down and kill him." His eyes went to Ashley's locker.

"I like the sound of that."

#

He sat down on the staircase, and looked at the quarian sitting on the next step down. "Tali?"

"The new armor worked." She didn't look at him. "I didn't get as much as a scratch."

"You did good down there."

"Was there anything I could have..." She leaned forward, and wrapped her arms around herself. "Could I have done something to..."

"I've asked myself that question a thousand times over the years." Michael looked down at his hands. "You can run the scenario through your head, analyze every piece, every motion. If I'd made a different call, Ashley would be alive, and Kaidan wouldn't. Or Garrus. Liara. Wrex. You." He put a hand on her shoulder. "You did your best, Tali. But there is a hard truth, one we have to learn to accept."

"What's that?" She looked back at him.

"You can do your best, do everything right, and that still won't change rule ten."

"Rule ten?"

"Soldiers die."

Slowly, Tali nodded. "I'm going to miss her."

"We all are."

#

"Commander. I know it couldn't have been easy for you down there." Joker touched some of the controls. "Making the call between Alenko and Williams must have been..." He glanced back at Michael. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't know if I could have done it."

"Sometimes making the tough choice is the only way a mission can succeed." Michael looked at the readout.

"I'm not blaming you, Commander. I'm just..." Joker sighed. "It's hard, you know."

"Saren's still out there, Joker. Hold it together. We need you."

"Don't worry." Joker nodded fiercely. "I won't let you down. I want to be there when you make that son of a bitch pay."

#

"Sir, about..." Kaidan sighed. 'About Williams..."

"How are you dealing with that?" Shepard raised an eyebrow, and then gestured for Kaidan to enter the room.

"Dealing, sir." He hung his head. "Sorry for what I said back there. Adrenaline."

"I understand." Shepard looked down at his hands, rubbing the thumb of one into the palm of the other. "I don't like losing people either."

"I've served for years, but never lost a soldier under my command. Not to hostile action, anyway." He hesitated. He hadn't, but Shepard had. "If you don't mind my asking, how did you deal with the losses on Torfan?"

For a moment, Shepard was silent. "I fucked up. I opened fire on surrendering batarians. I dishonored the uniform, and the sacrifice my team had made." He looked up. "I failed. I vowed not to let that happen again." He looked down again. "Same here. I'll remember her, and I'll do better for her."

"I guess..." Kaidan nodded. It was odd, hearing raw emotion in Shepard's voice. Stranger still, seeing a trace of vulnerability in his face. "I guess that's all we can do." He looked down. "You've never really talked about them."

"Ashley..." Shepard leaned back in the chair. "She reminded me a lot of Bai, sometimes. Same kind of crazy. Bai and I went through basic together. Even dated a while." He glanced at a datapad. "Writing Bai's little sisters was..."

"Yeah." He'd only known Ashley and Jenkins a couple months. It was hard to think about what it would be like to lose a teammate you'd known for years.

"Brekin and I are the only ones left now." Shepard twitched a shoulder. "I only managed to pull about two-thirds of him out. Asshole named his kid after me anyway. Taught him to call me 'Uncle Mike'."

Kaidan blinked. "Mike?"

"I do have a first name, you know." He looked up at Kaidan. "Just remember this: We won, and a lot of lives were saved. A lot more will be saved, if we keep going. That's a bargain Ashley Williams would never hesitate to make. If there is a heaven, it's got a new valkyrie." He shrugged. "Death closes all: but something ere the end, some work of noble note, may yet be done."

#

"I've been thinking about Saren. I actually feel a little sorry for him now." Liara sat on the edge of the desk.

"He's the last person I'd feel sorry for."

"He is trapped inside his own mind. Part of him senses his identity slowly being swallowed up by Sovereign, but he is powerless to stop it." Liara looked down at the floor. "I wonder how he first fell into Sovereign's trap? Did he think he could somehow stop the Reapers from returning? Or was he simply driven by a lust for power and glory?"

"There's nothing noble about Saren or what he did. He got exactly what he deserved." There was a line. Saren had crossed it before he'd even met Sovereign.

"Yes, I suppose you're right." Liara sighed. "I should not waste sympathy on Saren. Not when there are so many others who have suffered because of him."

"How are you holding up?" He raised an eyebrow at her. "I know you didn't exactly sign on for the whole..."

"No." She shook her head and stood up straight. "I did. And if you are leading up to offer to leave me behind on the Citadel, then I appreciate it, but it is unnecessary."

Michael met her eyes. "You sure?"

"Aside from..." She took a deep breath. "If I walk away now, I would spend the rest of my life wondering. I'm in, Shepard."

"Good to know."

#

"I forwarded the mission update to the Citadel, Commander. We've got confirmation on those reinforcements." Joker's voice came over the comm. "Ambassador Udina wants us to report back to the Citadel. The Council is massing a joint-species fleet to deal with Saren and his geth."

Michael shook his head. "Took them long enough. Back to the Citadel, Joker. I want the Normandy at the head of that fleet." And when this was over, he was going to use Saren's head as a hood ornament.

"Yes, sir."

#

Udina was waiting for them in the council chambers. "Good job, Shepard. Thanks to you, the Council's finally taking real action against Saren."

The asari councilor nodded. "The ambassador is correct. If Saren is foolish enough to attack the Citadel - as you believe - we will be ready for him."

"Patrols are stationed at every mass relay linking Citadel space to the Terminus Systems." The turian councilor clasped his hands behind his back.

For the love of... Had they actually read the report? "You think a blockade's going to stop him? He's on Ilos looking for the Conduit right now. What are you doing about that?"

"Ilos is only accessible through the Mu Relay, deep inside the Terminus Systems, Commander." The salarian councilor shook his... her... ugh... head. "If we send a fleet in there, the only possible outcome is full-scale war."

"Now is the time for discretion, Commander. Saren's greatest weapon was secrecy. Exposed, he is no longer a threat. This is over." Udina turned towards him.

"One ship going into the Terminus Systems won't start a war." Michael narrowed his eyes. "I can be discreet."

"You detonated a nuclear device on Virmire." The turian councilor pointed at him. "I wouldn't call that discreet." For the love of fuck, that had been the salarian team's idea.

"Your style served you well in the Traverse, Commander." The asari councilor spoke up, her voice soothing. "We recognize that. But Ilos requires a deft touch. We have the situation under control."

He turned to Udina. "If Saren find the Conduit, we're all screwed. We have to go to Ilos."

"Ambassador Udina, I get the sense Commander Shepard isn't willing to let this go." Well, the turian councilor could certainly grasp the obvious.

"There are serious political implications here, Shepard. Humanity's made great gains thanks to you. But now you're becoming more trouble than you're worth." Udina glared at him.

"You bastard." Kaidan spoke up before he could. "You're selling us out."

"It's just politics, Commander. You've done your job, now let me do mine. We've locked out all the Normandy's primary systems. Until further notice, you're grounded."

"You backstabbing asshole." Michael shook his head.

"I think it's time for you and your team to leave, Commander. This no longer concerns you. The Council can handle this. With my help, of course."

He brushed past Udina as he stormed out of the council chambers, Kaidan and the rest of his team a pace behind him.

#

Kaidan sighed. On the way back to the Normandy, Shepard had been stopped by two men. He'd threatened to shoot both of them. Now he was punching a locker, and there were a few scattered pieces of an electronic device on the ground. "Commander?" He sighed. "I'm sure there's a way to appeal. We're under Alliance authority, not the Council's."

"Kaidan, you have any idea how many in the Alliance brass I've pissed off over the years?" Shepard leaned against the locker and shook his head. "Any appeal would take time we don't have."

"So where do you think the best view will be when the Reaper's roll through?"

"I vote we grab a couple beers and go skinny-dipping in one of those lakes in the Presidium." Shepard twitched a shoulder.

That mental image threw him for an abrupt loop. Kaidan shook his head. "I've heard worse plans."

"I don't like being sidelined. And I've never been one for following all the rules of the game. I'll think of something." Shepard took a deep breath. "I need you to be there while I figure things out."

"You know you can count on me." Kaidan smiled. "Or any of the crew, Commander."

"Kaidan, I can get a salute from anyone on this ship. You..." Shepard shrugged, and slumped down to sit against the locker. "I'd have shot him."

"Sir?"

"Finch. If you hadn't been standing a few feet behind me, I'd have killed him."

That... Kaidan leaned against the wall. He wasn't sure what to make of that comment. "Well, I always leave a way out. You know that. I'm here for you, but we're in a rough spot and the last thing I want to do is muddy things." He sighed. "Especially when it's not all that clear to start with." He was surprised to find he'd said that part out loud. Kaidan straightened up. "Are we the pride of the fleet or not? Are we valued agents, or just peons?"

"You can't just pull out a good old fashioned 'it'll be alright' can you?"

"It's that easy, huh?" Kaidan smiled. "Okay then. Everything will be alright, Shepard. You'll figure it out." Who knows, maybe he would too. He offered Shepard a hand back to his feet.

"Anyone ever told you you're a shit liar?" Shepard gave him a half smile. "Well, we've got some downtime, and life as we know it is about to come to an end, so..." He threw an arm around Kaidan's shoulder. "Want to go rob a bank?"

He laughed. "I-"

"Sorry to interrupt, Commander..." Joker's voice came over the comm. "Got a message from Captain Anderson."

"Are you spying on us, Joker?" Shepard raised an eyebrow.

"No sir. Just knew you were on the ship and figured I'd pass the message on. Captain said to meet him at Flux, that club down in the wards."

"Right." Shepard shook his head and stepped away from Kaidan. "Hey, stay close to the comm. We're going to need a getaway driver later."

"Well, I guess you'd better go then." Kaidan shrugged. He wasn't sure what he'd been about to say, but it probably would have been stupid.

"Come on." Shepard gestured.

Kaidan smiled as he followed.

#

"I'm glad you came, Shepard. I heard what happened." Anderson nodded when Michael, Garrus, and Kaidan joined him at the table.

"The Normandy's been grounded." Michael signaled the bartender for a round of drinks.

"I know. I'm sorry. I wanted to warn you, but there was no way to get a message to you before you docked." Anderson leaned forward. "I know you're pissed off right now, but you can't give up. They all think this is over, but we both know it's not. You have to go to Ilos. You have to stop Saren from using the Conduit."

"The problem is there's only one ship that can get me into the Terminus Systems undetected, and she's grounded."

"You say that like it's a problem." Anderson folded his arms. "I assume you have a plan for stealing the Normandy."

"Sir, I resent the implication." Michael straightened his back.

"Shepard." Anderson narrowed his eyes.

"Sir..." Michael raised an eyebrow. "I seem to recall you were very clear about what would happen the next time I stole an Alliance ship."

"Without my permission." Anderson's lips twitched slightly. "I meant without my permission." He raised an eyebrow. "Or do you expect me to believe you don't have several contingency plans for stealing the Normandy?"

Michael shrugged in resignation, earning him amused looks from his companions. "Taking over the ship is easy. Taking off with the ship not so much. The problem is the Citadel has the ship in lockdown. I can't fix that from on the ship, and the red flag will go up too fast for me to make a pickup. Ground team gets left behind, and -"

"Tell me what to do, and I'll take care of it." Anderson nodded.

"I may have been a bad influence on you, sir. Alright..." He ran through the options quickly. "Easiest way would be to use Udina's system. He's got the authorization to lift the lockdown, so we can just override his previous orders."

"But you'd still need his passcode to get into his office."

"Well..." Michael rubbed the back of his neck.

"You've got a copy of his..." Anderson narrowed his eyes. "Shepard, if I find out you've got a copy of my passcode I will shoot you."

"I promise that you won't find out." He fiddled with his omnitool briefly before offering Anderson the datacard. "You know you'll get arrested for this, sir."

"So will you. I expect you to break us out." Anderson took the card. "At least I know that's also something you can handle."

"I've never broken out of a prison before." Michael shook his head. When Anderson raised an eyebrow, he shrugged. "That was a rehabilitation center. Not a prison." When Anderson continued staring, he sighed. "That doesn't count either. I broke into, not out of."

"I am so glad I'm not with C-Sec anymore." Garrus chuckled.

"Get to the Normandy and be ready. You can be in the Terminus Systems before anyone even knows you're gone." Anderson stood up.

#

"When did you work out a plan to steal the Normandy?" Kaidan asked as they started out of the bar.

"About ten minutes after I first set foot on it." When Kaidan gave him a look, he shrugged. "It's not like I intended to actually do it..."

Kaidan laughed. "So you just randomly plan to steal ships?"

"And cars. Bikes. Boats. Transports. Shuttles." Shepard shrugged. "Space stations." He took something out of his pocket and flipped it up into the air before catching it again. "Udina's credit chit." He casually tossed it over his shoulder, letting it bounce down into the common area near where a bunch of teenagers were sitting around. "Oops."

"You pickpocketed Udina?" Kaidan stared at him.

"Remind me to tell you sometime about how Hackett and I actually met."

#

The light on the console turned green. Michael glanced down at his pilot. "Let's go. Get us out of here, Joker. Now."

He let out the breath he was holding as soon as they got through the first mass relay. "Well, we are now officially fugitives."

"Aw, damn it." Joker sighed. "No sign of pursuit? I was hoping the Council would send some ships after us. I was looking forward to putting the Normandy through its paces. Figured I'd get to see what

this ship can really do."

"The way our luck runs?" Michael flicked Joker's hat. "You'll get your chance."

Pressly grinned at him as he walked by, heading to the CIC. "I can't believe we stole the Normandy. I know we'll all be court-martialed if this doesn't work out. But part of me loves this."

Yeah. He'd definitely been a bad influence on these people. Michael smiled.

#

"I can't believe we stole the Normandy." Garrus adjusted the sight on his rifle. "I mean, I'm not surprised after everything you've told me. But still..."

"Worried?"

Garrus's mandibles clicked. "No, not really. If you're wrong, we'll pay for it. But if you're right, and we did nothing, I think we'd regret it a whole lot more. I just hope we can catch Saren before they realize we're missing."

"Garrus?" Michael folded his arms. "I made it one hundred and seven miles in a stolen food cart when I was fourteen. This is the Normandy. We'll get him. Be ready when we do."

"You stole a food cart?"

"Yeah, not one of my better ideas. I broke the refrigeration unit and it was a really hot day. The cops actually got into an argument over which ones had to be in the vehicle with me on the trip back."

"You know, I've got thank you, Shepard."

"For what?" Michael raised an eyebrow.

"For everything. Taking me with you. Letting me be part of your team. I've learned a lot." Garrus nodded. "I've thought a lot about what you said. About eliminating the threat immediately. Regardless of the cost. You were right. You were right about Dr. Saleon, too. Killing him was the only solution."

"So what now?"

"Well, assuming we don't all die or go to prison, I'm going to reapply for Spectre training. It will probably kill my father, but I've got to try. If that doesn't work, I'll do just about anything..." Garrus shrugged. "Except go back to C-Sec. I'm done with them. No more red tape. No more politics. From now on, I do things my way."

"It occurs to me that when this is done, after we break Anderson out of prison, we could always go the merc route." Michael leaned on the mako. "Freelance asskickers. Lot of folks out there the law can't quite touch."

"That's..." Garrus's mandibles clicked again. "Not a terrible

idea."

#

"Son, what the hell are you doing?" Hackett stared at him.

"I believe the term is mutiny, Admiral." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry."

"You better..." Hackett sighed. "I'll keep a channel open. But if you're wrong, I won't be able to help you this time."

"If I'm wrong then..." Michael nodded. "Then my crew was following my orders, both as their commanding officer and as a Council Spectre, sir. And I technically kidnapped Liara, Wrex, Garrus, and Tali." He met Hackett's eyes. He didn't have to point out Hackett owed him that one. They both knew it.

"Understood." Hackett nodded, and then pointed at Michael. "Don't think this is going to get you out of getting your ass kicked."

"Well, look on the bright side. You'll probably be able to requisition a squad of MPs to give you an actual chance."

"Shepard?" Hackett folded his arms. "Win. That's an order. Hackett out."

17. Chapter 17

"Stealing an Alliance ship." Wrex shrugged. "Risky stuff. But I'm right behind you, Shepard. It's the least I can do."

"Everyone else thinks I'm crazy." Michael waved a hand. "They're probably right."

"Sometimes crazy is the best way to go. I just hope they don't catch us before we get our hands on Saren."

"They won't." Michael nodded. "You'll be able to use Saren's skull as a handpuppet soon enough."

"With you, anything's possible." Wrex gave something that passed as a smile.

"So long, Wrex."

"Shepard."

#

"We're fugitives on the run. Very exciting, Shepard." Tali tilted her head. "I wonder what the Council would do to us if we got caught?"

"I'm a fugitive. You're one of my hostages." He leaned on the railing.

"I'm a hostage?" Tali leaned on the railing next to him.

"Crew is following the orders of a Council Spectre, so they're clear. The rest of you are hostages." He glanced at her. "Try to look less cheerful about that."

"Can I have the Normandy now?"

"No."

#

"Commander?"

"Alenko."

Kaidan swallowed. "Can I come in?" When Shepard waved haphazardly at the other chair in the room, he entered and sat. "Are you alright?"

"Been two years since my last court-martial." Shepard shrugged. He was attempting to put a shattered electronic device back together. "Was probably due."

"Well, you won't be alone in this one, at least."

"Yeah, I'll have Anderson with me." Shepard leaned back. "Already talked it over with Hackett. The rest of you were following orders. Keep your mouths shut, and you'll be fine. Not sure about your careers, but you won't do time." He sighed. "This is the third frigate I've stolen."

He blinked. "Third?"

"First one was turian. Mostly derelict. We stole it from a pirate base, then rigged an autopilot and escape pod and crashed it back into the pirate base." He leaned forward again and started working on the pieces spread out on his desk. "Second one was batarian. We were retrieving a memory core from a pirate base and Bai elbowed me and pointed out the window and said 'that's a lot less cramped than the shuttle'. He was right, so we stole it on the way out."

"They sent you out for a memory core, and you came back with a batarian frigate?" Kaidan laughed.

"Zavala was mad they wouldn't let us keep it. It ended up part of some covert ops thing, I think. Something about Corsairs." Shepard sighed down at the device. "Fuck. Memory core is shot."

Kaidan leaned forward and recognized the device as Shepard's music player. "You can use the sound system in your computer."

"Never downloaded my music files to it, and they locked me out of my home system." Shepard shrugged. "All my ship computer has is that default volus opera that comes with the software."

"You can borrow mine, if you want." Kaidan smiled.

"Any chance you've got Sinatra?" Shepard gave him a hopeful look.

"Is that an asari band?"

The tool he had been using was tossed onto the table, and Shepard sat up, staring at him. "Sinatra." When Kaidan just shook his head, Shepard continued. "Frank Sinatra. Earth musician. Born 1915. Died 1998. Rat Pack. The Chairman of the Board."

"Sorry, Commander." He shrugged apologetically. "Not ringing a bell."

"What kind of twisted place is Canada, anyway?"

"You're a big fan?" Music from centuries ago. It seemed an odd trait for a man normally concerned about the latest tech.

"My grandfather had a couple old time music players. One played these cylinder things. One was a turntable. Phonograph. Built in 1931. He had original records of a lot of early works. Some of the first human music ever recorded." Shepard leaned back again. "Quiet afternoons, he'd set it up on the back porch, and we'd look out over the fields, watch the horses, and just listen. There's a quality to that kind of..." He shrugged. "Can't duplicate it with the modern stuff. Sinatra, Charles, Presley. Sinatra was his favorite."

"I've never heard of him." Kaidan shook his head. "He's good?"

"Classic." To his surprise, Shepard started to sing. "_Fly me to the moon and let me play among the stars. Let me know what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars."_

It took him a second to realize he had heard the song, on a children's show he'd once enjoyed. "That's..." He chuckled. "Wow. You can sing."

"I was a choir boy once. Tell anyone..." Shepard twitched a shoulder. "I'll shoot you."

Kaidan tilted his head. Fields and horses didn't sound like... "I thought you said you were from New York." He blinked when he realized Shepard had gone completely still. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

The other man was quiet for a long moment. Then he nodded. "Tell you what..." Shepard looked up at him. "You come visit me in prison, I'll tell you the whole story."

"Deal."

#

"Uh..." Joker looked over his shoulder. "Commander? We've got company."

"Have their sensors picked us up yet?" Liara asked.

"Stealth systems are engaged. Unless we get close enough for a visual, they won't have any idea we're here."

Pressly spoke up from his position at the station behind them.
"Picking up some strange readings from the planet's surface."

"Take us down, Joker." Just their luck Saren got there first. "Lock in on the coordinates."

"Negative on that, Commander. The nearest landing zone's two klicks away."

"We'll never make it in time on foot." Kaidan shook his head. "Get us something closer."

"There is nowhere closer. I've looked."

Michael nodded. "Drop us in the Mako."

"You need at least a hundred meters of open terrain to pull off a drop like that. The most I can find near Saren is twenty."

"Twenty meters?" Kaidan sighed. "We'll never get in close enough for a drop."

"We have to try." Liara gestured.

"Find another landing zone."

"There is no other landing zone."

"The descent angle's too steep." Tali looked over the readout.

"It's our only option." Liara folded her arms.

"It's not an option. It's a suicide run. We don't -"

"I can do it." Joker's quiet voice cut Kaidan off.

"Joker?" Michael looked down at the pilot.

"I can do it." Joker nodded.

Right. "Gear up and head down to the Mako. Joker -" He nodded. "Drop us right on top of that bastard."

#

The mako came to a stop. Tali sat in the driver's seat. Slowly, she turned to look back at them. "We're alive."

"You sure?" Michael raised an eyebrow at her.

"Almost definitely." She nodded.

"Alright." He popped the hatch. "Then we've got work to do."

#

"We have to get inside this bunker before Saren finds the Conduit." Kaidan shook his head. "There's no way we're getting past that door with brute force."

"And whatever it is I need to hack to open it isn't here." Michael glared at the door.

"Saren found a way to open it." Garrus gestured. "There must be some kind of security override somewhere in this complex."

"We'll have to find some way to get it up and running again."

"Right." Michael nodded. "Wrex, protect the mako. Tali, protect Wrex. The rest of you, with me."

"50,000 years to figure this out and it's down to 25 mutineers." Kaidan shook his head as he followed. "Way to go, team Milky Way."

#

Michael glanced at the readout on his omnitool. "Nobody shoot the colossus."

"What..." Liara turned towards him. "Why -"

The colossus fired its big gun, blowing apart two of the other geth. It then turned to provide them with cover fire. "Because I hacked the repair station." Michael unslung his rifle. "Nobody tell Tali. She'll want to keep it."

"I don't know..." Garrus shrugged as the colossus blew apart another group of oncoming geth. "It is kind of cute."

#

"Come on. Saren's already got a headstart. We have to go find him before he reaches the Conduit." Garrus gestured with his rifle.

Kaidan shook his head. "Unless he's already found it. Then we're just walking into a trap."

"That's a chance we'll have to take." Garrus started walking. "Hold on..." He stopped when a console lit up. "Something's happening."

"- too late." Static garbled the message. "Unable to... invading fleets... no escape..."

"Sounds like some kind of message." Garrus shook his head. "But I don't recognize the language."

"It's probably in Prothean. This recording must be 50,000 years old. No wonder we can't understand it." Kaidan sighed.

Michael stared at them. "So..." He raised an eyebrow. "That didn't make sense to you?"

"No, Commander."

"Well, shit." He ran a hand down his face. "The message is all broken up, but I recognize some of the words. It's a warning against the Reaper invasion."

Liara almost immediately started bouncing. "The Cipher must have transferred an understanding of the Prothean language into your mind."

"... ot safe... seek refuge... side the archives..."

"What's it saying? Can you make out anything useful?"

".. Allied Reapers... the Citadel... overwhelmed... only hope... act of desperation... the Conduit... all is lost..."

"It said something about the Conduit, but it's too degraded to help. We should go." Michael sighed.

"You speak Prothean." Liara matched his pace at they started out of the chamber. "You actually speak Prothean."

"You're going to dissect me, aren't you?"

"No, don't be silly. A long term in-depth psychological study would..."

"Rule number two. No long term in-depth psychological studies of the Commander."

"That's..." Liara blinked. "Rule two?"

"Rule two is whatever your commanding officer says it is." Michael nodded. "Come on, saving the galaxy."

#

The bunker door was open. "Who votes we take the vehicle into the creepy, underground bunker?" Kaidan glanced over his shoulder.

"Good idea." Garrus nodded. "The firepower will come in handy."

"I'll man the guns." Michael climbed onto the mako.

"I'll drive." Garrus started to follow.

"The hell you will." Michael offered Tali a hand up. "Last thing we need is for you to run over another thresher maw."

"We could always sic the thresher maw on Saren." Tali headed for the driver's seat.

"Right, that's a great plan." Michael took his position. "Let's just sic a thresher maw on our enemy."

#

"And there is a barrier."

"It's a trap. Saren must have set an ambush."

"I don't think Saren's behind this." Kaidan tapped the display in front of him, which indicated a door had opened nearby. The readings

were strange.

"Alright..." Shepard sighed. "Let's go see what's in the creepy beckoning room. That always works well in vids."

"Do the vids suggest any safety precautions we could take?" Garrus started climbing out of the mako.

"Well, if the classic vids are at all accurate, the only way to ensure your safety is to remain a virgin." Shepard shrugged. "So don't worry, Garrus. You'll be fine."

Garrus made a strangling gesture at him.

#

"You are not Prothean. But you are not machine, either. This eventuality was one of many that was anticipated. This is why we sent our warning through the beacons." The hologram was strange, twisting in shape as if it couldn't project properly.

"Looks like some kind of VI program. Pretty badly damaged." Garrus tilted his head at the hologram.

"I do not sense the taint of indoctrination upon any of you. Unlike the other that passed recently. Perhaps there is still hope."

"Wait a minute." Kaidan shook his head. "How come I can understand you? Why aren't you speaking the Prothean language?"

Michael let out a sigh of relief. Everyone understood this one. He didn't miss the amused look Liara sent him.

"I have been monitoring your communications since you arrived at this facility. I have translated my output into a format you will comprehend." The spinning of the hologram abruptly shifted directions. "My name is Vigil. You are safe here, for the moment. But that is likely to change. Soon, nowhere will be safe."

"Why did you bring us here?" Michael stared at the hologram.

"You must break a cycle that has continued for millions of years. But to stop it, you must understand or you will make the same mistakes we did. The Citadel is the heart of your civilization and the seat of government. As it was with us, and as it has been with every civilization that came before us. But the Citadel is a trap. The station is actually an enormous mass relay. One that links to dark space, the empty void beyond the galaxy's horizon. When the Citadel relay is activated, the Reapers will pour through. And all you know will be destroyed."

Questions came from him and his companions, but the answers made little sense. The keepers were apparently part of the problem, but the real problem appeared to be simple complacency. "The Reapers can wipe out the Council and the entire Citadel fleet in a single surprise attack."

"That was our fate. Our leaders were dead before we even realized we were under attack. The Reapers seized control of the Citadel and through it, the mass relays. Communication and transportation across

our empire were crippled. Each star system was isolated, cut off from the others. Easy prey for the Reaper fleets. Over the next decades, the Reapers systematically obliterated our people. World by world, system by system, they methodically wiped us out."

Holy shit. "Some of you must have managed to survive."

"Through the Citadel, the Reapers had access to our records, maps, census data. Information is power, and they knew everything about us. Their fleets advanced across every settled region of the galaxy. Some worlds were utterly destroyed. Others were conquered, their populations enslaved. These indoctrinated servants became sleeper agents under Reaper control. Taken in as refugees by other Protheans, they betrayed them to the machines. Within a few centuries, the Reapers had killed or enslaved every Prothean in the galaxy. They were relentless, brutal, and absolutely thorough."

He looked at his companions. Then he nodded and turned back to the hologram. "You said you brought me here for a reason. Tell me what I need to do." There had to be some way to kick the Reapers in the teeth.

"The Conduit is the key. Before the Reapers attacked, we Protheans were on the cusp of unlocking the mysteries behind mass relay technology. Ilos was a top secret facility. Here, researchers worked to create a small-scale version of a mass relay. One that linked directly to the Citadel: the hub of the relay network."

"The Conduit's not a weapon." Kaidan's voice came from behind him. "It's a back door onto the Citadel."

"Sneaky. I'd like it..." Michael nodded. "Except Saren's the one trying to use it. He's going to activate the Citadel mass relay."

"The keepers are controlled by the Citadel. Before each invasion, a signal is sent through the station compelling the keepers to activate the Citadel relay. After decades of feverish study, the scientists discovered a way to alter this signal. Using the Conduit, they gained access to the Citadel and made the modifications. This time, when Sovereign sent the signal to the Citadel, the keepers ignored it. The Reapers are trapped in darks space."

If the door is locked, use a window. "Saren can use the Conduit to bypass all the Citadel's external defenses."

"Correct. And once inside, he can transfer control of the station to Sovereign. Sovereign will override the Citadel's systems and manually open the relay. And the cycle of extinction will begin again."

Like hell. "We'll take Sovereign down. Point us at his ass, and we'll kick it."

"There is a data file in my console. Take a copy when you go. When you reach the Citadel's master control unit, upload it to the station. It will corrupt the Citadel's security protocols and give you temporary control over the station. It might give you a chance against Sovereign."

"Wait." Garrus shook his head. "Where's the Citadel's master control

unit? I've never heard of anything like that."

"Through the Conduit. Follow Saren. He will lead you to your destination."

"Saren's got enough of a head start." Michael gestured. "Grab that data file and let's go."

#

"That's a lot of geth." Kaidan stared at the screen.

Michael reached for his rifle. "Wrex, get on the guns. Garrus, you're with me."

"Um..." Garrus grabbed his rifle. "Doing what?"

"Old Earth game. Cowboys and robots." Michael opened the hatch.

"I think you might be mixing your centuries, Commander." Kaidan chuckled.

#

With him and Garrus on the outside of the mako, picking off the smaller geth, Wrex was able to focus the mako's guns on the big ones. Tali never slowed the mako, even under fire. If it wasn't for the straps they'd attached to the hull, both he and Garrus would have been thrown off several times.

A geth's head exploded, and Garrus let out a whooping sound. Michael adjusted his fire for speed, and put a round into a geth holding a rocket launcher. "We're almost through. Let's get back inside cause..." He caught a glimpse of what lay ahead. "Well. Shit."

#

"You want me to drive a mako through a mass effect relay?" Tali asked.

"Yes." Michael nodded. "Preferably without letting any of those platforms down there shoot us in the process."

"Right." Tali nodded. "Might want to sit down for this." She hit the speed control.

18. Chapter 18

The world exploded in a blue haze for a moment, and then they were at the Citadel. The mako flew through the air, landed, flipped over a couple times, rolled over some geth, and finally came to a halt upside down.

"Status." Michael began unfastening his harness.

"Ow," came a response from Liara.

The rest started to chime in. "Commander?" Tali's voice quivered just

slightly. Michael moved to her side and noted that the quarian's arm was quite definitely broken. Wrex had a good sized piece of shrapnel that had gone through his leg. They got both of them out of the mako and slapped medigel on. The Avina platform was helpfully informing them that the station was under attack, because the attacking geth fleet didn't make that obvious.

"You did good, Tali. We'll get a doctor back to you as soon as possible." Michael patted her uninjured shoulder. "Wrex, I'm sorry, but..."

"Get your ass moving, Shepard." Wrex examined his shotgun. "I'll watch your backs." He glanced at the Avina kiosk that was still informing them they were in danger. Then he shot it.

Michael shook his head and started moving.

#

Kaidan used his biotics to throw a geth back. Shepard and Garrus had dropped their usual competitive banter in favor of just killing geth as quickly as possible. Without a word, they'd assumed positions. Liara moved with Garrus, using her biotics to reinforce him, while he kept a position with Shepard. He put up a barrier while Shepard reloaded.

They got to an elevator, but it didn't take them far before coming to a stop. "We're trapped."

"Bullshit." Shepard hit the control for his helmet. "Suit up, we're going to do this the hard way." He waited until they all had their helmets in place, and blew a hole in the side of the elevator. They started walking up the side of the Citadel.

After shooting another geth, Garrus shrugged. "You just know they are going to add 'vandalism' to the list of charges."

"Yeah." Shepard threw a grenade into an oncoming krogan. "Let's go save their asses anyway."

#

"The station's arms are closing." Liara gestured as the area they were standing jolted slightly.

"Oh, that can't be good." Garrus shook his head.

"No. It's worse than that." Michael pointed up and they all turned to see Sovereign had made it inside before the station sealed. Leaving the Citadel fleet outside. "So much for having backup."

"So it's just us against the giant primordial artificially intelligent space ship." Kaidan sighed.

"Join the Alliance, Hackett said. Preferable to going to prison, Hackett said." Michael reloaded. "It'll be good for you, Hackett said."

#

"Garrus, cover me." Michael started moving towards the turret controls. He saw the telltale shimmer in the air that revealed Kaidan had put up a barrier. As quickly as he could, he hacked the turret controls and set it to fire on the geth dropship. Then he moved to the next.

He heard Garrus curse as a rocket exploded near him. One last turret, and a few moments later the drop ship exploded, forcing them all to dive for cover. "Everyone alive?" He waited a heartbeat as they all checked in. "Then get your asses moving."

#

"The cockroach has docked." Michael glared.

"We're almost to the council chambers." Kaidan sent another geth flying off into space.

"From the sound of things, the fleet isn't doing so well." Garrus touched his radio.

"At least it can't get -"

"Liara, don't you dare say it can't get worse." Michael sniped another geth. "The universe takes remarks like that personally."

#

Saren was in the council chambers. They headed up the stairs towards him. They were only about halfway when Saren tossed a grenade in their direction, forcing them all to dive for cover.

"I was afraid you wouldn't make it in time, Shepard."

"Had to wipe out a few hundred of your followers along the way." Michael readied his sidearm. "Sorry if I kept you waiting."

"You've lost. You know that, don't you? In a few minutes, Sovereign will have full control of all the Citadel's systems. The relay will open. The Reapers will return." Saren waved a hand.

If the man started monologuing, Michael was going to kill him twice. "I'm heading to that master control panel. And you can't stop me."

"You survived our encounter on Virmire. But I've changed since then. Improved. Sovereign has..." There was a strange note in Saren's voice. "Upgraded me."

Well, that was nicely ominous. "Fancy hardware's not going to save you."

"You don't understand, Shepard. There is a place for organics in the new order. The Reapers need men and women of action. People like us." Saren gestured. "Sovereign recognizes your value. You've impressed it. Surrender to the Reapers and you will be spared. Join us and we can find a place for you."

Michael exchanged a disbelieving look with Kaidan, then rolled his

eyes. "I'd rather die than live like that."

"Then you will die. And your companions. Everyone you know and love. Everyone you've ever met. Don't you understand? You will all die." Saren's floating platform lifted him higher. "The Reapers can't be stopped. Not by the Protheans. Not by you. The cycle always continues."

What the hell? Why not try diplomacy? "The Reapers don't use organics. They devour and discard them. As soon as the conquest is over, you'll be cast aside."

"I had no choice. You saw the visions. You saw what happened to the Protheans. Surrender or death - there are no other options."

"You could have resisted." His disgust was real now. There were things out there worse than death. Worse than scavenging from dumpsters and sleeping on the street. "You could have fought. Instead, you surrendered. You quit."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe there is still a chance for..." Saren clutched his head. "Unh. The implants..." Saren's floating platform moved drunkenly as Saren clutched at his head. "Sovereign is too strong. I'm sorry. It's too late for me."

Michael rolled out of cover and started up the stairs. "There's still one way to stop this..." He nodded to Saren. "If you've got the guts."

For a moment, Saren just stared back at him. "Goodbye, Shepard. Thank you." Saren laid the barrel of his sidearm against his jaw and fired.

#

Michael worked the console quickly. "Vigil's data file worked. I've got control of all systems."

"Quick." Kaidan nodded. "Open the station's arms. Maybe the fleet can take Sovereign down before he regains control of the station."

"See if you can open a communications channel," Garrus added.

Opening the channel took only a moment. "... the Destiny Ascension. Main drives offline. Kinetic barriers down 40%. The Council is on board. I repeat, the Council is on board."

And then a voice he was actually happy to hear. "Normandy to the Citadel. Normandy to the Citadel. Please tell me that's you, Commander."

"You were expecting someone else?" he asked Joker.

"We caught that distress call, Commander. I'm sitting here in the Andura sector with the entire Arcturus fleet." Well, when Hackett offered backup, he really wasn't kidding. "We can save the Ascension. Just unlock the relays around the Citadel and we'll send the cavalry in."

Garrus shook his head. "Are you really willing to sacrifice human lives to save the Council, Shepard?"

"Commander..." Liara stared at him.

"This is bigger than humanity." Kaidan gestured. "Sovereign's a threat to every organic species in the galaxy."

"This Council must be sacrificed for the greater good. Don't waste your reinforcements. Hold them back until the Citadel's arms open up. Save the human fleet to attack Sovereign."

"What's the order, Commander? Come in now to save the Ascension or hold back?"

Hackett was leading the fleet. If anyone could pull this off, it was the geezer. "Opening the relays now, Joker. We need to save the Ascension."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Shepard." Garrus nodded.

"I'm giving humans the opportunity to kick ass." Michael gestured at the wreckage they'd left behind on their way in. "Fortunately, we're pretty good at it."

#

Hackett's voice came over the communication relay. "Alliance ships move in. Save the Destiny Ascension."

"Commander - we're picking up reinforcements."

"It's the Alliance. Thank the Goddess."

Joker's voice came over a few moments later. "Destiny Ascension, you are all clear. Repeat, you are all clear."

"The Citadel's opening." Hackett's voice came again. "All ships move in. Concentrate on Sovereign."

"They're having fun without us." Michael shook his head. He gestured to Garrus. "Make sure Saren's dead." He looked over the readout. A moment later, he heard the sound of Garrus firing another round.

Kaidan's voice came back up. "He's dead."

Michael was about to suggest they find a good spot to sit and watch the action when the platform started shaking. Red lightning seemed to strike around them. The weird energy slammed into Saren's corpse. The platform collapsed, sending Michael plummeting into the area below just as Saren's corpse exploded in red light.

And then the damn thing got back up.

#

Kaidan threw up a barrier, but almost wasn't sufficient. Shepard barely managed to roll clear of the incoming attack. The thing that had been Saren leaped to the top of the chamber, moving in a way no

turian would have been able to manage. It moved again before he could bring his biotics to bear, then leaped at Liara. Garrus only barely managed to pull her out of the way.

As it turned back towards him, Shepard leaped out of his cover and caught hold of the thing, slapping a grenade on it before rolling clear once more. Kaidan immediately ducked in the same direction, wrapping a barrier around them both.

The grenade exploded, and... The thing attacked again. "You've got to be kidding me..." Shepard growled as he brought up his sidearm and started shooting again. He stood, making a target of himself as Garrus repeated his previous attempt with the grenade. Again they all ducked, with the biotics wrapping barriers around themselves and their teammates.

It was still moving. Shepard had to put two more rounds in it before it finally stopped moving and dissolved into component parts.

"Commander, look." Liara pointed.

They all looked up to see the red lightning now tracing around Sovereign. The giant ship was clearly in trouble. It detached from its position and started to fall. Joker's voice could be heard. "Its shields are down. Now's our chance."

"Hit it with everything we've got." Hackett ordered.

The fleet closed in, the Normandy at its head. "Hard on my flank. We're going in."

And then the Normandy put a big hole in Sovereign. Garrus, Liara, Kaidan, and Michael all started cheering as Sovereign exploded.

Right up until they realized the debris was heading right towards them. "Go." Michael ordered, and they all began to run.

#

He regained consciousness to find himself trapped by debris. Garrus was nearby, breathing but still out. Kaidan managed to get to him, and applied medigel. Liara was stirring, and shook her head when he ran the medical scanner over her. There was no sign of Shepard.

Kaidan didn't want to consider what that might mean. He could smell smoke. He shifted position, trying to push some of the debris out of the way with his legs. It didn't budge. Trying it with his biotics just made his growing headache worse. Liara's attempt didn't fare much better.

Garrus woke a couple minutes later. "Status?" He groaned.

"Can't get anyone on comms." Kaidan rubbed the back of his neck. "Shepard must be trapped elsewhere."

"Damn it." Garrus shook his head, and then yelled. "Shepard." There was no response. He tried again. Then he slumped. "Damn it."

Forcing the thought out of his mind took effort. He ran the medical scanner over Garrus again mostly just to give himself something to focus on.

The debris shifted. It shifted again, and then there was light. A man in a citadel security uniform moved some of the debris away. Then he smiled. "Captain Anderson. We've found them. They're in here."

Anderson was there a heartbeat later, helping pull them out. "Take it easy..." He helped Kaidan to his feet. "It's over. You're safe now." He looked around. "Where's the commander? Where's Shepard?"

Kaidan started to shake his head and then... he caught movement out of the corner of his eye. Someone was making their way towards them from the other side of the chamber. He couldn't help but smile when he saw Shepard standing atop part of the rubble that had been Sovereign. He was limping, bleeding, and gloriously alive.

#

"I can't help but notice this isn't a prison cell, Captain." Michael leaned in the doorway as he watched Wrex glare at the doctor tending to Tali. He wasn't sure what they'd given the quarian, but she was doing a rather amusing pantomime of the mako's trip through the mass relay. Complete with sound effects.

"It seems they'd prefer not to make a big fuss by arresting us at this juncture. Considering you're a big hero and all." Anderson shrugged.

"I admit..." Michael turned to see Hackett. "I did sort of want to see you explain why you expected us to believe you'd managed to kidnap a krogan warlord."

"Hadn't thought that far ahead, sir." Michael shrugged.

"The ambassador and the council want to speak with you." Hackett folded his arms. "As soon as possible."

"I think I'd rather go to prison."

"Don't tempt me." Hackett smiled. "Did you really hang up on them?"

"No." Michael rubbed the back of his neck as Hackett continued staring at him. "Maybe. A little. Only a couple times."

"Son, you are so overdue for an ass-kicking..." Hackett turned towards Anderson. "Did you really punch Udina?"

"I, uh..." Anderson sighed. "Yes."

Michael stared. "Captain?"

Hackett just sighed, shook his head, and walked away.

#

"Ambassador. Captain. Commander Shepard." The Asari councilor smiled when they approached. "We have gathered here to recognize the enormous contributions of the Alliance forces in the war against Sovereign and the geth."

"Many humans lost their lives in the battle to save the Citadel, brave and courageous soldiers who willingly gave their lives so that we - the Council - might live."

"There is no greater sacrifice, and we share your grief over the tragic loss of so many noble men and women."

"The Council also owes you a great personal debt, Commander. One we can never repay. By defeating Sovereign, you have saved billions of lives. You have the courage of your convictions and a ruthless determination to succeed. Through your actions, you have become a symbol of everything humanity represents."

"Your species has an indomitable will, a fierce, savage spirit that will not bend or yield. We used to believe this made humans stubborn, even dangerous."

"But now we understand that these traits are what make you strong. There are dark times ahead; the Council needs humanity and its strength."

It was a good speech. Michael didn't even nod off once. Udina stepped forward. "As the Alliance ambassador, I accept your offer. Humanity will join its strength to yours. We will take our seat on the Council."

"We will need a list of potential candidates." The salarian nodded.

"Given all that has happened, I am sure your recommendation will carry a great deal of weight, Commander." The asari councilor met his eyes. "Do you support any particular candidate?"

Wait, what? This was something he got a say in? Um... Well. Shit. Uh... He swallowed. "We need someone with the courage to stand up for what he believes in. Someone like Captain Anderson."

"Him?" Udina shook his head. "You must be joking. Anderson prefers to let his fists do the talking."

"Only with you, Ambassador. Only with you." Anderson shrugged as he cemented himself as the optimal candidate. And if he was the Councilor, they wouldn't be able to change their minds about arresting him for helping to steal the Normandy.

"Are you sure about this, Commander?" Udina stared. "The captain is a soldier, not a politician."

Another point in Anderson's favor. "We've already got too many politicians on the Citadel. The captain would be perfect for this job."

The asari councilor nodded. "The shadow of war darkens our future; selecting someone with military experience is a wise choice."

"I'm honored, Councilor." Anderson straightened. "As humanity's representative, I'll do everything in my power to help guide the Council."

"The battle with Sovereign destroyed our illusion of peace and security. Now the galaxy will look to us - the Council - to defend them."

Michael took a deep breath. "Sovereign alone nearly wiped you out. You won't stand a chance if the whole Reaper fleet shows up. Not unless I find some way to stop them." He turned, and left the council chamber to go find his crew.

"Shepard's right." He heard Anderson's voice. "We're on the verge of war with an enemy unlike any the galaxy has ever known; a war for the very survival of all life as we know it. Humanity is ready to do its part. We will not back down. We will not surrender. We will lead you into battle against the Reapers and we will drive them back into dark space."

#

They sat around a makeshift table in the hold of the Normandy, passing around a couple bottles provided by Wrex. "Udina really expected you to pick him as the Councilor?" Garrus's mandibles clicked.

"Yep." Michael nodded. "Tali, got you a souvenir." He tossed her something.

She caught it, and then laughed. "Is this Udina's timepiece?"

"Normally I'd point out stealing is wrong..." Kaidan took a swig. "But since it's Udina we're talking about..."

Joker sighed. "The only real problem is since the Normandy isn't stolen, I have to give it back."

"Who says I was letting you keep it in the first place?" Michael raised an eyebrow as he took a drink.

"You wouldn't have gotten a say. You'd have been in jail."

"To not having to break our commander out of jail." Liara held up the bottle.

"It's almost a shame." Garrus handed the bottle back to Tali. "I had a plan and everything."

"Did this plan involve Wrex eating anyone?" Tali asked.

"Yes." Garrus nodded.

"I like that plan." Wrex downed the rest of a bottle. "Shepard, go get arrested."

"The night is young." Michael took another drink.

"Could always go rob a bank." Kaidan stared down at the bottle. "What is this stuff, anyway?"

"To robbing banks." Tali laughed.

"Where does Udina keep his money?" Joker asked.

"Good question." Michael shrugged. "Maybe best we don't know. We're supposed to be..." He put a hand over his heart. "Symbols of everything humanity represents."

"A bunch of drunks." Garrus gestured.

"I'll drink to that." Joker demonstrated.

Michael looked down at his bottle. "Myself not least, but honour'd of them all; and drunk delight of battle with my peers. I am a part of all that I have met." He lifted the bottle. "To Ashley."

"To Ashley." They all lifted their bottles, and drank.

19. Chapter 19

"The speed of the Nexus is certainly useful, but I prefer the additional shielding of the Logic Arrest."

"Polaris maintains more of the speed, but doesn't sacrifice as much versatility as the Nexus."

"The Savant model definitely combines the best of all worlds though."

Garrus looked over his shoulder at Kaidan and Tali before shaking his head. "Would you believe they are still talking about omni-tools?"

"I know." Michael sighed. "Nerds."

#

Liara and Kaidan both turned to stare as Wrex walked past. Shepard was slung over one shoulder, and Garrus was slung over the other. "What happened?" Kaidan asked as they followed Wrex to the infirmary.

"They got into a debate about scram rail modifications and tried to settle the matter with a drinking contest." Wrex rather unceremoniously dumped his burdens into the cots as Dr. Chakwas came over. "I'm not telling them which one passed out first until they pay me back for settling the tab."

#

"Head better?" Michael sat across from Kaidan.

"Yeah." Kaidan nodded. "Sorry. A lot of bright lights and noise."

"No worries. We got the smuggler. I didn't even get to shoot anyone."

Michael shrugged. "Jenna's already back to work at Flux and Rita's complaining that now she's not getting as good of tips."

Kaidan laughed. "Some days you just can't win." He set his hands in front of him. "So if you're not from New York, where are you from?"

"It's um..." He sighed. "Kind of a long story, and it's been a long day."

"Oh. I see." Kaidan nodded. "I just thought..." He swallowed. "Well, you said you'd tell me the whole story."

"If you visited me in prison." Michael waved a hand. "I'm not in prison." He tilted his head and amended the statement. "Yet."

"It's alright." Kaidan smiled. "I'm probably taking up too much of your time anyway. Maybe there's someone else you'd rather confide in. Sir."

It was still odd realizing how much he'd already confided. The only other person he'd ever mentioned his grandfather to was Hackett. "All right, Alenko. Off the record, permission to speak candidly, cross my heart and hope to die." Michael leaned back in his chair. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Uh, Dr. T'Soni. Sir." Kaidan gave an awkward shrug. "I thought you might want to spend some time with her."

"Liara? Why would I be spending time with Liara?" Michael shook his head. "She asked, but I turned her down. You're free and clear there."

"Why would..." Kaidan blinked. "Sir, I thought you were interested in Liara."

Michael blinked. "Me? Why would you think..." He shook his head. "Kaidan, you're my friend. I'm not going to step on your toes."

"Wait..." Kaidan raised an eyebrow. "You think I'm interested in Liara?"

"You..." Michael tilted his head. "Aren't? But you've been worrying over her..."

"That's um..." Kaidan laughed. "Well, she's a member of the crew and I thought she was my commanding officer and friend's girl."

He opened his mouth. Then he closed it again. Then he opened it again. "Well, this is awkward."

"She made a pass at you, and you turned her down because you thought I was interested in her." Kaidan rubbed his neck. Awkward was definitely one way to put it. "I'm feeling a little bit bad for her right now."

"Alright..." Michael pinched the bridge of his nose. "Next time we rescue a gorgeous space damsel in distress, let's work on the whole 'communication' thing."

#

Anderson stared at them, and rubbed his forehead. "Any of you want to explain how taking Tali to a bar for her birthday ended up in an AI nearly self-destructing on the Presidium?"

"We..." Michael sighed. "Frankly, sir, we're a little confused about that ourselves."

"Well, the good news is that the Council has apparently changed their minds about having you nearby. They've suggested we find a mission for you that does not involve you being at the Citadel." Anderson shrugged. "There is a missing survey team out in Hades Gamma. And when you're done with that, Hackett said to remind you that you've got shore leave."

#

Kaidan tried to keep a straight face as he watched Hackett and Shepard trash-talking each other in the boxing ring. The two weren't even bothering to pretend it was going to be a fair fight. Hackett actually pushed Michael off the ropes when Michael had started climbing into the ring.

"Twenty seconds, Shepard. You're already doing better than last year." Hackett blocked a punch.

"Last year you used a stun grenade." Shepard ducked the return blow and sent an elbow at Hackett's side.

"That was just my right hook." Hackett demonstrated with a right hook that Shepard only barely managed to deflect.

"Please, I've seen volus with better right hooks than that." Shepard retaliated with an attempt at a leg sweep that almost knocked Hackett down. Shepard shook his head. "You're getting slow, old man."

Hackett caught Shepard's next swing and sent Shepard flying over his shoulder. "Old age and treachery will always overcome youth and an attitude problem."

Shepard rolled out of the way of the follow up attack and regained his feet. "At least you've learned to come to terms with your geezerhood. I thought that yo-" Shepard started twitching, and then fell to the ground.

Casually, Hackett tossed the stunner up in the air, caught it, and put it back into its hidden holster. "I warned you about the g-word, son." He shrugged. "And I win again."

#

He watched Shepard head up to the bar to get their drinks, the apparent penalty for losing. "You two do this every year?"

"Tradition." Hackett nodded to Kaidan. "He tell you how we met?"

"He said he stole your wallet."

"No. I got my wallet back. He stole my security pass and used it to steal a quarter million in goods from a secure Alliance special ops warehouse he shouldn't have even known existed." Hackett shrugged. "Then when I caught sight of him again, he had the option of running for it and getting away clear." He glanced towards the bar. "Instead he risked his life to pull kids out of a burning car. Used himself as a shield to protect the last one."

"He..." Kaidan blinked. "Left some parts out."

Hackett stared at him for a moment. "How much has he told you about the rest of it?"

"I um..." Kaidan shifted awkwardly. "He told me he robbed a bank. And that he did some time for robbing a jewelry store when he was fourteen." He raised an eyebrow. "Why do you ask?"

"Twelve years we've been doing this." Hackett rested his arms on the table. "This is the first time he's brought anyone along."

"Oh." Kaidan looked up at Shepard as he brought their drinks back. He couldn't help but chuckle at the gaudy umbrella and fruit sculpture that Shepard had apparently taken upon himself to add to Hackett's.

The Admiral took the drink and stared at it a moment. Then he looked up at Kaidan. "Did you know he has a middle name?"

"No." Shepard frantically shook his head. "No I do not."

#

Michael stared at the door Udina had just exited. "Geth."

"To be fair..." Tali shrugged. "We are really good at killing geth."

He sighed, and picked up Udina's desk chair before turning towards Wrex. "Five credits says you can't get this into the water."

Wrex smirked.

#

"You alright?"

Kaidan glanced up at Michael. "Yeah. Why do you ask?"

Michael looked around. "You're slumped in the dark." He walked over and sat down next to Kaidan. "You sure you're alright?"

"I'm just..." Kaidan sighed. "Trying to figure something out."

"Anything in particular?"

"You."

"Fair enough." Michael shrugged. "Been trying to figure that out for a while myself."

"What's that mean?" Kaidan shifted a little to turn towards him.

"I don't know." He was silent for a while, and then shrugged.
"Montana."

"What?"

"I'm from Montana. Small town. Farm. Kind of place that never made it into the twentieth century, let alone the twenty second. Even still had one of those pumps you have to work by hand to get the water out. Horses. Arabian, with blood lines going back a few hundred years."

"How did you end up robbing banks in New York?" Kaidan gave him a confused look.

"My grandfather died when I was nine. With him gone, there..." He sighed. "Well, after he was gone my father didn't have to worry about someone countering the story he told the cops, cause my mother and grandmother sure as hell never did. After he put me through a wall, I took off. Hitched a ride with a guy who happened to be going to New York." He twitched a shoulder. "He invited me to stay with him. Turns out his intentions weren't..." Michael leaned back against the wall. "As noble as he made out. I managed to hack the lock on the room he'd given me, and got lost on the streets. Did bits and pieces of time here and there. Joined the Reds just after I turned sixteen. And then Hackett found me."

"I..." Kaidan stared at him. "Wow. Shit. I, uh..." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Wow."

"Hackett drove me to Camp Murphy. On the way there, I said I was thinking of changing my name. Told him I didn't want to carry anything of my father with me. Hackett just looked at me and said, 'it's as much yours as it was his. Steal it back.'" He smiled. "Geezer had my measure from day one." He met Kaidan's eyes. "Why do you care?"

"I, uh..." Kaidan shrugged. "It's just that..." He twisted so he could face Michael. "I like being around you. But I-" He shifted awkwardly. "I probably shouldn't take up so much of your personal time."

"Kaidan, if I objected, I wouldn't..." Michael twitched a shoulder. "I've never talked about most of this with anybody before, so if..." He looked down.

"The thing I've been sitting here trying to figure out..." Kaidan looked away a moment before turning back towards him. "Would you like to go get coffee?" He blurted the words out. "I mean when we get back to the Citadel or wherever, not the machine in the mess or..." He trailed off.

Michael stared at him for several heartbeats. "Yes."

Kaidan smiled.

#

"Disengaging FTL drives." Joker hit the console. "Emission sinks active. Board is green..." He glanced at the readout. "We are running silent."

"We're wasting our time." Pressly shook his head. "Four days searching up and down this sector, and we haven't found any sign of geth activity."

"Three ships went missing here in the past month. Something happened to them."

"My money's on slavers. The Terminus System is crawling with them."

"Picking up something on the long-range scanners." An ensign spoke up. "Unidentified vessel. Looks like a cruiser."

Joker checked the readout. "Doesn't match any known signatures."

"Cruiser is changing course. Now on intercept trajectory."

Pressly went to the screen. "Can't be. Stealth systems are engaged. There's no way a geth ship could -"

"It's not the geth." Joker shifted in his chair as his hands flew over the controls. "Brace for evasive maneuvers."

#

He grabbed his helmet and rushed to where he knew the commander would be. Shepard was securing his own helmet when Kaidan found him. "Shepard."

"Distress beacon is ready for launch." Shepard's voice was calm.

"Will the Alliance get here in time?" Another shudder of the ship nearly knocked him off his feet. "Ungh."

Shepard helped him back up before grabbing a fire extinguisher. "I'm not doing this just so they can find our frozen corpses. Get everyone onto the escape shuttles."

He caught the fire extinguisher Shepard tossed him. "Joker's still in the cockpit. He won't abandon ship." Kaidan shook his head. "I'm not leaving, either."

"I need you to get the crew onto the evac shuttles. I'll take care of Joker." Shepard gave him a shove towards the shuttles.

"Michael..."

"Kaidan. Go." Shepard turned to look at him. "Now."

Kaidan felt a chill go down his spine. "Aye, aye." He headed into the ship to help the crew.

#

The ship was breaking up around him. Michael headed up the stairs and towards the helm. A look up showed him the planet they were soon going to crash into. Under other circumstances, he might have found the view beautiful.

Joker was still alive. Small miracles. "Come on, Joker. We have to get out of here."

"No. I won't abandon the Normandy. I can still save her."

"The Normandy's dead -" Michael put a hand on his shoulder. "Just like us if we don't get the hell out of here."

"No. We just have to -" Joker stared at a readout. "Oh no." He shook his head. "They're coming around for another attack."

Michael turned to see the ship being all but sheered in half by one of the enemy vessel's weapons. He grabbed Joker's arm, and cursed to himself when he felt the bone snap. Joker yelped. "Ah. Watch the arm."

Unfortunately, they didn't really have time for him to be careful. He'd have to apologize later. He hauled Joker out of the chair and dragged him towards the escape pod. He'd only just managed to get Joker secured when another volley hit the ship. The Normandy shuddered, and Michael was thrown back against the bulkhead.

Another volley, and the blast was between him and the escape pod. He saw Joker shaking his head desperately. "Commander." The ship shuddered again, and he just barely managed to keep himself from being thrown into the void. "Shepard."

Michael met Joker's eyes, and then hit the button that launched the pod. And then a shudder sent him flying. Something hit the back of his suit. Shit. He was losing air. He tried desperately to fix the leak, and then he was gasping.

The universe went dark.

20. Chapter 20

He helped Dr. Chakwas out of the pod, and she immediately went to the side of one of the injured crew. Kaidan looked around and started counting pods. Six, seven... He smiled. And they were hauling in one more.

The crewman opening the pod to his right stumbled backwards with a look of shock on his face. Wrex stepped out a moment later, followed by Tali, Garrus, and most of engineering. He looked over the faces. "Tanaka?"

Adams shook his head. Tali put a hand on the chief engineer's shoulder, and he briefly hugged her to him.

"Where's the commander?" Garrus asked.

Kaidan pointed at the last pod. "He retrieved Joker." He got out his medical kit and went to help one of the engineers.

When they opened the last pod, he stood and started in that direction. One of the crew helped Joker out and... Kaidan went still. No one followed Joker out of the pod. Joker looked up and met his eyes, his face bleak.

"No."

#

"Kaidan?"

He looked up to see Garrus. "Hey."

Garrus sat down across from him. "I uh..." His mandibles clicked. "Shit."

"Yeah." Kaidan leaned back. He gestured haphazardly at the music unit. "Sinatra."

"What?" Garrus glanced at him.

"Musician from back on Earth. Before we'd even really launched anything into space." He leaned back in the chair. "Shepard was a big fan."

"Oh." Garrus settled back to listen.

#

Brekin sighed. "Crazy bastard never did visit often enough, but..." He took a drink. "Still hard to believe he's gone."

"Yeah." Kaidan took a drink from his own bottle.

"Smaller turnout than I expected." Brekin shrugged. "But then he didn't have anything in the way of a family and his friends have this habit of dying in blazes of glory." He frowned. "Still, I expected reporters or politicians."

"I think Hackett scared most of those off." Kaidan stared down at his bottle.

"And an empty coffin." Brekin gave a small laugh. "It's kind of like him, you know. Not to bother to turn up to his own funeral." He took another drink. "He mentioned you a few times. I was glad, cause..." Brekin sighed. "He was never what you might call open, but after Torfan..." He turned the bottle around in his hands. "He was this vaguely familiar stranger. The last couple letters though were like..." He smiled. "They were actually from my old friend, if that makes any sense."

"We'd talk sometimes. Usually I was talking to Commander Shepard and..." Kaidan leaned back. "Then he'd shift, just a little. Twitch his shoulder or duck his head and I was talking to Michael." He glanced up when he realized Brekin was staring at him. "What?"

"You had it bad, didn't you?"

Kaidan blinked. "What?"

"Sorry, don't mean to..." Brekin shrugged awkwardly. "You and he were..."

"No, I..." Kaidan shook his head. "No, we..." He looked down at his hands. "I don't..." He sighed.

"Shit." Brekin sighed. "You mattered to him. I know it's damn poor consolation at the moment, but..." Brekin finished his beer. "You mattered to him."

#

Tali hugged him again. "I'm going to miss you."

Kaidan hugged her back. "You'll be getting a hero's welcome back on the flotilla."

"I know, but..." She sighed. "Take care of yourself, Kaidan."

"You too, Tali."

He watched her go. Wrex had left a couple weeks ago. Garrus was still on the Citadel, but he barely had time for a quick drink. Liara had gotten involved with something and bid them a hasty farewell. And now Tali was gone. He felt numb.

It took him a moment to realize he wasn't alone in the room.
"Admiral."

"Lieutenant." Admiral Hackett nodded. "Anderson tells me you're thinking about staying with the Alliance."

"Yes, sir." Kaidan nodded. He looked back out the window. Then he clenched his fists. "It's not fair."

"It's not." Hackett shrugged. "But then, if it was, men like Michael Shepard wouldn't exist in the first place. I suppose we wouldn't either." He put a hand on Kaidan's shoulder. "Still work to be done."

"Yeah." Kaidan nodded. "Supposed there is, sir."

#

Something was beeping. There was something beeping. An alarm or... His body wouldn't respond. It was wrong, it was... The ship was on fire and Ashley was trapped by the geth. Cold. Needed to get the heat on or they'd all freeze and the cops were coming in the door and he needed to run and King had stopped moving needed to find someone needed to escape to where was the escape pod...

"There. On the monitor. Something's wrong."

A woman's voice. Something's wrong. Something was wrong. Images appearing and light meant his eyes were open weren't they? Hospital? Was he hurt? The crew was hurt. Where was his crew were they hurt Joker was still in the cockpit Brekin by the red pole the bombs are

coming need to find...

"He's reacting to outside stimuli. Showing an awareness of his surroundings."

Lights out. No. Eyes closed. He opened them again. This time his head moved. Not the infirmary. Not on the Tecumseh. Tecumseh was training where was Normandy breaking white light cutting the ship the Normandy was dying.

"Oh my god, Miranda. I think he's waking up."

His head moved. A woman was approaching. Molly? No. A man on the other side. He needed to get up, get moving, get the crew, get coffee where was his crew?

"Damn it, Wilson. He's not ready yet. Give him the sedative." No. Sedative would make it dark. He needed to find his team. Kaidan get to the escape pods. He tried to push the woman away, and she caught his hand and pushed it back down. "Shepard - don't try to move. Just lie still. Try to stay calm."

The doctor wasn't Chakwas wasn't familiar get the needle away get the needle away legs wouldn't move but needed to get to get from get somewhere where they were. They were in danger and he needed to get to them pull them out Meyers screaming and screaming and stop him before he stabs Molly broke two fingers on his jaw shouldn't hit them in the face and he couldn't breathe broke my ribs he's going to kill me this time the ship is breaking need to find...

"Heart rate still climbing. Brain activity off the charts." The woman was moving. Can't follow body won't move. "Stats pushing into the red zone. It's not working."

Air escaping. Air... breathing, need to breath. Need a medic. Kaidan. Go. Now.

"Another dose. Now."

Breathing. Quieting. Need to find...

"Heart rate dropping. Stats falling back into normal range."

The woman is looking at him. Blue eyes. Black hair. Name? Can't match the name. Not...

"That was too close. We almost lost him."

Up. Moving. Lost. Get lost. Can't hurt you if they can't find you. Find an anchor before you get lost at sea.

"I told you your estimates were off. Run the numbers again."

Fading. Fuzzy around the edges and blending and blurry. Ask before...

End
file.